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OR,

JACKSON BLAKE'S FULL HAND AT HARDTACK.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,
AUTHOR OF "JOE PHENIX, THE POLICE SPY,"
"THE BAT OF THE BATTERY," "OVERLAND
KIT," "THE FRESH OF 'FRISCO," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ALONG THE MUSSELHELL.

NORTHWARD, straight as the crow flies, goes the trail which leads from the little town of Livingstone, on the upper Yellowstone River, to the gold-diggings on the head-waters of the Musselshell in wild, romantic Montana.

The Hardtack district was the name by which the new diggings were generally known, and the legend went that the original discoverer of the gold fields purchased his knowledge from a starving Sioux Indian, whom he met, by the exchange of a few pounds of pilot bread, universally known in the far West as hardtack.

"DO NOT FIRE, FRESH OF 'FRISCO," SHE EXCLAIMED. "IT IS I, THE SPECKLED
PIGEON—YOUR FRIEND!"

The brave was on a hunting excursion and had been badly wounded by the accidental discharge of his gun.

The miner, on a prospecting tour, with the usual assistant, a patient little burro (Spanish-American for donkey) found the brave, gave him some hardtack, all he had to spare, to keep life within his frame, while he hunted up the Indian's companions.

In gratitude the red chief revealed to the miner the secret of the rich deposits of gold in the section now known as the Hardtack Diggings.

It was a very pretty story whether true or false but the evidence seemed to show that it was the truth.

The diggings were rich, and the gold was so deposited that a common miner with the rudest of utensils could make good wages without having to work very hard, therefore as soon as the news spread abroad in regard to the new discoveries there was the usual rush of discontented men to the section.

There is a strange fascination to the average miner in the reports which come from new strikes.

If the gold seeker has not succeeded in striking it "rich" where he is, he is usually glad of a chance to rush off to some other point, always being of the firm belief that he cannot fail to hit upon a bonanza in his new location, but after he has been in the fresh field for a few weeks, he is generally ready to go off to another quarter, even though he is doing well, so fickle is man.

The principal camp in the new gold-field was known as Hardtack City—two-thirds of all the little mining-camps are "cities," although they may not be able to boast of over fifty or a hundred inhabitants.

And now for our tale.

Along the narrow trail, so faint at times that it was hardly discernible, rode a horseman, mounted upon a great, gray mule, which was carrying its rider with as easy a motion as though the man sat in a rocking chair.

The rider was an old acquaintance to those readers who have followed the fortunes of the old and eccentric gentleman known as Jackson Blake, the Fresh of Frisco.

It was indeed the renowned sport, the invincible gamester, the almost matchless expert with all kinds of weapons, the champion wrestler and boxer, who was good enough in this line to hold his own with the best professionals who had ever "shied their castors" within the magic circle of the pugilistic prize ring.

The sport was in fine feather, being attired in a well-made suit of black corduroy, a stuff which has the shine of velvet, and yet is suitable to stand rough usage.

He wore coat and pantaloons only, no vest, a fawn-colored flannel shirt, with a rolling collar, in the bosom of which sparkled a solitaire diamond pin, worth a couple of hundred dollars of any man's money; a pair of handsome high riding-boots covered his legs to above the knees—regular cowboy boots, the polished, dainty articles such as rejoice the cow-puncher's heart.

Around his waist was a belt of polished leather, which supported two holsters carrying a pair of nickle-plated revolvers of the size known as "navy," no pop-guns, but effective tools, upon which a man might safely trust his life.

A ten-inch bowie-knife kept the revolvers company, and across his back was slung a Winchester rifle.

He was riding in a Mexican saddle, attached to the horn of which was a raw-hide lasso, so it will be seen that the sport was well provided with offensive weapons.

A broad-brimmed slouch-hat, the usual head-gear of the wild West, crowned his curly yellow locks and, take him for all and all, he presented as good a picture of graceful, physical manhood as the pencil of the artist could have drawn.

The sun was beginning to sink behind the far western hills, and a shade gathered upon the rider's face as he noticed it.

"It is not many hours to night and darkness now!" he exclaimed. "And yet I am not in sight of the river."

"According to the instructions, when I reach the Musselshell I am to turn to the west, then ten miles more brings me to Hardtack City."

The trail at this point led up a little swell of ground, and as the sport came to the top his eyes were gladdened by the sight of a stream, gleaming in the sunlight, about a half a mile away.

"Aha! there is the river at last!" the Fresh exclaimed.

"Now then, King Solomon, stir your stumps lively, and we will make the camp before the shades of night cover the earth."

By this high-sounding name the beast was known, and upon being thus addressed he pricked up his ears and loped on at an increased pace, just as though he understood his rider's speech.

Soon the river was reached, and as the rider turned the mule's head to the west, the beast stuck out his nose toward the water, indicating as plainly as though he had put the request into words that he wanted a drink.

"All right, old boy, I will accommodate you!" quoth the Fresh of Frisco, and he rode the mule to a spot where the bank shelved in such a way that the beast could get at the water.

As the animal quenched his thirst the gaze of the sport chanced to wander to the west and he discovered a horseman coming along the trail.

The man was only about a quarter of a mile away when the sport saw him, having just emerged from a little belt of timber which had masked his approach.

The man was riding a big "American horse," as the beasts imported from the East are known in some sections of the West to distinguish them from the undersized native animals.

He was a tall, thin fellow, gaunt, without a pound of fat upon him, and the skin seemed to be so tightly strained over his bones that it was a wonder they did not break through.

Muscular in build though was the stranger, and in spite of his spareness of flesh it looked as though he was a man of prodigious strength.

He had a long, hatchet-like face, the most prominent feature of which was his massive chin, and that gave plain evidence that the stranger had great resolution; the chin was covered by a scanty bristling beard, fiery red in hue, as was also the few straggling locks of hair which escaped from under the weather-beaten army hat which the rider wore.

He was clad in a full suit of buckskin, very much the worse for wear, and was as well-provided with weapons as the sport.

It did not take the Fresh long to conjecture as to who and what the man was as soon as the stranger came near enough for him to get a good view.

Upon the side of the horse was the brand, U. S., and this, and the military hat, gave the Fresh a clew.

He was one of the scouts attached to some of the frontier posts.

"I might as well inquire if I am in the right road," Blake remarked, as the horseman drew rein.

"The direction was for me to turn to the west, after reaching the river, but I have known a man to say west when he meant east, and it will not do any harm to question this scout, for it is good, safe betting that he knows this country like a book."

The mule finished drinking just as the horseman came up, and the sport guided him back into the trail so as to converse with the stranger.

"How are you?" said the sport. "Am I in the right road for Hardtack City?"

The scout halted upon being accosted, nodded in a grim sort of way in response to the sport's salutation and then replied:

"Yes, you ar' all right; you want to head due west an' keep to the river, which will fetch you thar; the town is on the river, you know."

"Yes, so I understood. I see I had the directions all right, but I thought it would not do any harm to inquire, so as to be sure I was in the right road."

"Not a mite—not a mite!" the other declared, impressively.

"Did you ever consider, stranger, w'ot a heap o' trouble thar would be saved in this world if the folks generally would live right up to Davy Crockett's motto, 'Be sure you ar' right, an' then go ahead?'"

The Fresh immediately perceived that the man was an odd character, and as he liked to talk to a genius of this stamp, he resolved to draw him out.

"Yes, I think you are right about that," he replied. "There cannot be any question about the matter."

"But the great trouble with most of the people in the world is that they are entirely too previous," the Fresh continued.

"You have hit it plum' center, by gum!" the odd old fellow declared, with a deal of emphasis.

"Yes, entirely too previous—too much in the habit of going off at half-cock, so to speak."

"Right ag'in, by hookey!"

"And the worst of the matter is that when a man makes a mistake of that kind it does not seem to teach him wisdom, for in a very little while he goes and makes the same blunders again."

"Stranger, you are chock-full of wisdom!" the gaunt fellow declared.

"I have lived in this hyer breathin' world a heap of years," he continued. "But I don't reckon that I ever met a man who could figger the thing out any better than you hev jest done, by gum!"

"Well, I don't set up to be either a sage or a philosopher, but I calculate to use my eyes and ears as I go along," Blake remarked.

"An' you hev done it, too, by hookey! Tarnation salvation! I would be willing to bet a hull-batful of rocks on it! I reckon, though, you ain't the kind o' man w'ot generally troubles his noddle 'bout any philosophy," the scout observed, looking over the sport with a critical eye as he spoke.

"If I don't make any mistake, you are a card sharp."

"Oh, yes, that is my business."

CHAPTER II.

RATTLESNAKE SMITH.

THE old scout shook his head in a melancholy sort of way for a moment, and then he said:

"Wal, I 'spicioned from the style you was got up that you were one on the breed, an' yet I must say, that though you hev got a good many of the ear-marks, yet thar are some things 'bout you that I never see'd on no sharp afore."

"Is that so?" Blake rejoined, not at all disturbed by the criticism of the other.

"Yes, that is ther Gospel truth!" the odd individual declared.

"You ar' all rigged out in store-clothes, though you don't sport a b'iled shirt as the most of 'em do, an' you hev a better set of weapons than the sports ginerrally carry, but thar is a look inter yer face w'ot I never saw on the fore-front of any shark, wolf or vulture afore."

"You don't mind my speakin' right out in meetin', do ye?" the other queried, "cos that's natur', you see; I am an awful plain-spoken chap."

"Oh, that is all right," Blake replied, carelessly. "I have been too long in the business to be thin-skinned. A man who follows cards for a living must not be sensitive to remarks, or else he will be apt to have a great many bad quarters of hours."

"Yes, I reckon so."

"But in regard to being a shark, or a wolf, or a vulture, although I know that all three are the totems of the tribe to which I belong, yet I am not willing to acknowledge that any one of the names can with justice be applied to me."

"Going to try and argufy yourself out of it, eh?" the old fellow remarked with an approving nod.

"Yes, I am not willing to be lumped in with the rest," the sport declared.

"The shark, wolf and vulture are noted for being both savage and remorseless, the one in the water, the second on the land, and the third in the air, are ever on the watch for prey, and woe betide the unfortunate creature who falls in their way."

"That is so!" the other declared, wagging his head in a solemn way.

"Thar is no mistaking, Mister Man, that you are laying the thing down as straight as a string!"

"I always try to measure out even-handed justice, no matter whether I have an interest in the case or not!" the Fresh declared.

"That is the proper lay-out, an' the man w'ot runs a game o' that kind, will be sart'in to win in the long run."

"Yes, that is my idea. Now, then, I am a sport, a card-sharp—in fact, I am never backward in coming forward, no matter what the game is; but I am not a shark, a wolf, or a vulture. I do not rob men of their money—that is, I mean square fellows who are playing an honest game. If I run up against a skin concern, I am willing to admit that I do all in my power to bust it, and I don't mind confessing that I am not particular in regard to the means I employ, either."

"All roads lead to Rome!" and I take any road which will get me there."

"You're right! you kin bet yer boots on it!" the old scout exclaimed.

"But when I get the best of a man, I am anything but merciless to him," the Fresh declared.

"I will admit that many a time I have taken a man's last dollar, but that was to wind up the game, and when we quit the table I was always careful to give him a stake big enough for him to go ahead on."

"That was proper, an' shows that yer heart is in ther right place."

"I have always made it a rule never to banter a man into a game, unless he was some fellow so well-fixed that he had more money than he knew what to do with, and it was really a charity to relieve him from the care of so much surplus wealth."

"That is the right idee, by gum!"

"And, now, after this little explanation, I trust you will perceive that though I am a sport it is not altogether right to class me with the common run of sharps."

"I reckon you hev got it 'bout right, an' that is the reason that I kin see p'int in yer face that I never see'd in the face of no man in your line afore."

"Maybe it is."

"W'ot's yer handle?"

"Jackson Blake."

The old scout meditated for a moment and then shook his head.

"I reckon I never heered on you afore."

"Sometimes I am called the Fresh of Frisco."

Again the mountain-man shook his head.

"Never heered of any man with that handle either. I reckon you must be a stranger in these parts."

"Yes, I am; this is my first visit to this region."

"I reckon you will do pooty well," the other observed in a reflective way. "It 'pears to me that you are 'bout the kind of man w'ot ought to git along."

"If the reports which I have heard are true concerning the richness of this new gold-field there certainly ought to be a chance for a man like myself to make a good strike."

"Hardtack City is booming right along, an' no mistake; I reckon thar is plenty of room thar

for a man like yourself, if you kin succeed in git-ting thar all right."

A look of surprise appeared on the face of the sport.

"Well, it seems to me that the reought not to be any difficulty about my getting to the town," Blake remarked.

"That is so, yet I reckon thar maybe a heap," the old scout responded in a solemn way.

"Suppose you explain."

"You are a stranger in these parts you said?"

"I am."

"And I reckon that you don't know me from a side of sole-leather?"

"That is true, but I surmise that you are a Government scout."

"You hit the bull's-eye right in the center that time!" the old fellow declared.

"That is my business, and my name is Smith, Zeb Smith, an' yourn to command."

"Oho! I think I have heard of you!" the sharp declared.

"Mebbe so; I am pooty well known in this deestrick."

"You are generally called Red Smith, and the Indians have bestowed upon you the name of the Red Rattlesnake."

"Yes, you are right, an' no mistake! That is the handle that the bucks hev given me."

The sport surveyed the veteran with a deal of curiosity.

Only the evening before, in the little hotel at Livingstone where Blake had halted to bait his mule and get shelter for the night, the sport had heard the story of the remarkable frontiersman, Red, or Rattlesnake Smith.

"Well, I am glad to meet you," the sharp declared.

"I have met with so many strange sorts of men in the West that it is not often my curiosity is excited, but when I heard about you last night at Livingstone, and the men told how you liked to catch and handle rattlesnakes, just as children play with kittens, I reckoned I would like to see you."

A dry chuckle came from the thin lips of the old scout.

"I reckon the cusses were putting it on a leetle thick," he remarked. "I don't play with no rattlesnake, nary time," he continued. "It is true though that I hate the p'isoned things, an' that I would go a mile or two out of my way to kill the varmints at any time, but that is jest 'cos I hev got a grudge ag'in' the crawling reptiles which I reckon will last as long as I will."

"Well, I thought it was funny that a man should be such a persistent hunter of rattlesnakes just for fun, and I thought there must be some reason for it, although the men who told me the yarn said there wasn't—that it was only a whim on your part."

"Thar is a heap of fellers in this hyar world w'ot talk jist for the pleasure of hearing the sound of thar own voices," the veteran declared. "An' the less they know 'bout a matter the more anxious they ar' to talk 'bout it."

"I hate rattlesnakes 'cos the best pard I ever had was killed by the pesky critters."

"Ah, yes, I see; it is little wonder then that you should go out of your way to execute vengeance upon them."

"I reckon that I ain't quite right in my head as far as rattlesnakes are concerned," the old mountain-man admitted. "'Cos I will hev to own up that I git kinder crazy whenever I run afoul of the pesky critters, an' generally drop whatever I am at until I kin make an end of the crawlers; but the kurnel in command of Fort Scott—that is up on the head-waters of the Musselshell, you know—"

The sport nodded.

"Wal, he allers said as how he reckoned that thar is a deal of method in my madness, 'cos the red-skins hev got the idee inter their noddles that I must be fixed with the biggest kind of 'medicine' or else I would never dare to tackle the snakes."

"I understand," Blake observed. "It is so common for even the bravest of men to give a wide berth to rattlesnakes that the red bucks believe that you are something more than mortal or else you would not trouble the creeping monsters."

"That is it," the old fellow responded with a dry laugh. "And it is a fact that mighty few of the Injuns are willing to lock horns with me if they kin git out of it."

"It is natural," Blake remarked. "They argue that a man who amuses himself by killing rattlesnakes must be a pretty tough customer."

"Yes, and these red-skins air a mighty superstitious lot too, you know. They believe in signs, and all such things, you see, and as I hev allers been lucky enuff to come out first best in all skirmishes that I hev had with them they hev kinder got the idee into their heads that I am considerable of a devil, an' it ain't in either steel or lead to do me much damage."

"For a man in your line of business it is a valuable reputation."

"You kin bet all yer wealth onto that!" the veteran declared with a wise shake of the head.

"But, r'ally, as far as the rattlesnakes ar' concerned, 'tain't no great trick to kill the varmints when a man comes to understand the critters."

All I want is a little stick with a fork into the end ov it an' with sich a weepion I kin corner the biggest and ugliest rattler that ever shook his tail!"

"I am not well-posted in regard to snakes and I think if the crawlers will keep out of my way I will not be apt to trouble them," the Fresh remarked in a reflective way.

"But what was it that you were saying in regard to my not being able to get to Hardtack City—what is the trouble?"

"The Musselshell Sioux are on the war-path," was the startling reply.

CHAPTER III.

A DISAGREEABLE SURPRISE.

A CLOUD appeared on the face of the sport as he listened to this unwelcome intelligence.

"Are you certain that this is correct?" the Fresh asked.

"Oh, yes; I am on my way now from Fort Scott to the lower posts," the veteran replied. "The kurnel got wind o' the thing this noon, and a mighty quick man to act is Kurnel Poin-dexter, so he started me off to hurry reinforcements to him. He ain't got but 'bout sixty men, an' seeing that the Musselshell Sioux kin put nigh onto five hundred warriors in the field, the kurnel ain't well fixed to fight 'em."

"The post is strong enuff, you understand," the old mountain-man continued. "'Cos it is mighty well situated, for the kurnel is one of the best fighting men I ever ran across; one of the kind, you see, that knows war from A to Am-persand. He had the laying out of the posts, an' right from the beginning he has a 'spicion that thar would be trouble with the Sioux."

"Was the fort located for the purpose of protecting the gold-diggers?"

"In course!" the veteran replied. "I s'pose you ain't posted in regard to these hyer Mussel-shell Sioux?"

"That is true; I don't know anything about them to speak of. I was aware that there were Indians up in this neighborhood, but how many there was of them, or whether they were peaceable, or the reverse, I could not have told."

"But now that you speak of the bucks, I remember that at Miles City I heard some talk at the hotel there about the Indians being likely to meet trouble, but as nothing was said about the locality, I jumped to the conclusion that it was in that neighborhood," the sport continued.

"No; thar ain't much likelihood o' the red imps troubling anybody down that way, for thar is allers a good lot of sodgers in the forts thar, an' then thar's a heap o' men allers ready to volunteer for to help the sodgers out, an' you kin bet yer boots that the bucks ar' posted 'bout all things of that kind, an' they don't take no chances, you know."

"Yes, I am aware of that fact," the Fresh remarked.

"Although I don't know anything about these Sioux Indians yet I am well posted in regard to red bucks in general, for I have lived right among the Apaches," the sport added.

"Wal, thar ain't much difference 'tween them, 'cept that ther 'Paches ar' a leetle the worst of the two," Rattlesnake Smith declared.

"Still, the Sioux ar' bad enuff, an' all ov 'em ar' p'ison sarpiants," the veteran continued. "But, as I was a-saying, the red devils know too much to make war unless they feel pooty sart'in that 'bout all the advantages ar' on thar side."

"And I suppose they think they have got a pretty sure thing up in the Musselshell region?"

"Yes, I reckon so," the old scout responded, with a grave shake of the head.

"You see it is a mighty wild region, an' with the exception of the Hardtack settlement, which only kivers a deestrick 'bout ten miles squar', thar ain't any other settlements."

"And I should judge—although I am not well-posted in regard to the country—that Livingstone is the nearest point."

"Yes, Livingstone to the south and Diamond City to the west. It was by way of Diamond City that most of the miners came."

"And I suppose the red bucks look upon the white men as intruders into their country."

"You hev' hit it for sure!" Rattlesnake Smith declared.

"These hyer Musselshell Sioux, you see, ar' a kinder wild lot of red devils, anyhow," the mountain-man continued.

"This particular branch of the old Sioux tribe ain't backed up ag'in' the Government for a heap of years, 'bout twenty, I reckon, an' in that time a lot of young warriors hev grown up who hain't got no sense, an' as they never have been licked clean out of thar moccasins by the sodgers they ar' anxious for a fuss 'cos they reckon they won't have no difficulty in cleaving out the troops."

"It is the old story," the Fresh remarked.

"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

"Say! that is pooty good!" the veteran declared, impressed by the quotation.

"That is poetry, ain't it? Wal, I never had no great opinion of poetry, but I will be gold-darned if that ain't good, common sense all the way through!"

"It fills the bill to a ha'r!" Rattlesnake Smith

declared. "The old bucks who have smelt powder, an' understand jest how hard the Great Father at Washington kin strike when he gits his mad up ain't anxious for trouble, 'cos they have bin thar, an' come out at the leetle end of the horn, but the young warriors, who are like leetle b'ars with all their troubles afore 'em, ar' jest sp'iling for a fight."

"Yes, that is usually the way."

"These hyer Musselshell Sioux hev never been on a reservation, you know, an' they are jest about as wild as hawks."

"Just the sort to believe that the white men have no business to come into the country which they claim as their own, and be prompt to resent the intrusion when they discover that the intruders seem likely to settle down for good."

"Yes, that is jest the way the thing is working," Rattlesnake Smith responded. "At first I s'pose they reckoned that the thing would soon peter out as most all sich strikes do up in this region. I have known of twenty camps which locked as if they were going to develop into big things in the start-off, but arter a few thousand dollars' worth of gold was taken out, slumped right up."

"Oh, yes, failure is the rule and success the exception in mining."

"But Hardtack City r'ally looks as if it had come to stay," Rattlesnake Smith observed. "You see it happens to be a mighty good place for poor men, 'cos the gold is easy to get at, an' it don't cost ninety cents for to git a dollar's worth of gold out."

"I understand; a camp of that kind is always more prosperous at the start than one where expensive machinery is required to get at the gold."

"Sart'in! no doubt 'bout that, but thar are three mines in the Hardtack deestrick where machinery is required, for the rock has to be crushed, an' put through a reg'lar process, stamp mills are running, an' the ore is panning out first-class."

"As a rule that kind of mining is much more certain to hold out than where the gold can be got at easily."

"I reckon you are right 'bout that; all the mining sharps lay it out that way."

"Thar is some big bugs interested in these mills: politicians—fellers with a big pull at Washington, an' that's how this hyer military post came to be put up hyer on the Mussel-shell."

"Oh, yes, I understand," the sport remarked, with a smile. "When these men begin to invest their money in mines and machinery they wanted military protection right away."

"Yes, and they got it, too, an' I kin tell you, pard, that it was a good thing for the deestrick that the sodgers came, for the red imps would hav' made it lively for the miners long ago, only they were kinder skeery 'bout tackling the blue-coats."

"How comes it that they are going to make trouble now?"

"It is all on account of a new chief," the old mountain-man explained. "Tall Thunder, who used to be the boss of the tribe, died about two months ago, an' his son, Laughing Horse, succeeded him."

"The old man was an ugly devil enuff, but he had a good deal of hard, boss sense. He had bucked ag'in' Uncle Sam two or three times, an' had got the idee into his noddle at last that it was a game whar he was pooty sart'in not to git much but hard/knocks."

"Most of the red-skins come to that conclusion in the long run, but once in a while there is one who is too stupid to see that it doesn't pay to fight."

"As I said, the old buck was an ugly devil, but he wasn't a circumstance to his son, the Laughing Horse, who is one of the meanest red imps that ever lived; an ugly, contagerous cuss who has allus been wanting to fight the whites ever since he got big enough to go on the war-path."

"The old man held him back, but now that he has free swing he reckons to go in an' make things hum."

"A good thrashing will be apt to teach him wisdom."

"He is a pesky sarpiant an' no mistake!" the old scout asserted. "He has allers been down on the whites, an' yet he has hung 'round the towns a heap, too, for the cuss is fond of whisky, an' used to be 'bout half-full most of the time, so when his father died the other bucks reckoned to put in some other warrior as chief, but this hyer galoot turned over a new leaf an' made sich a fight for the leadership that the others were completely knocked out."

"That was rather odd."

"Sart'in! nobody thought the red imp had it in him, 'cos he has been hanging up by the nose 'round the saloons for three or four years; sich a swaller as he had for whisky I never did see, an' he was a nat'ral born gambler, too; tarnation salvation! You jest ought to see the on-blushing way the red cuss used to cheat! Why, he would skin a man out of his teeth, right before his eyes, if he wasn't watched."

"Yes, it is not an uncommon case; I have met a good many Indians who were inveterate gamblers, and when they become interested in a

game they seldom quit until they are stripped of all they possess."

"The Laughing Horse was one of that kind, an' he was an ugly devil, too, for a man to gamble with, 'cos if he lost he allers tried to pick a fight with the other feller, an' when it come to a skirmish he was a tiger, claws an' all!"

"A lively customer!"

"You bet! An' the red galoot learned to fight like a white man, too—use his fists, you know, like a reg'lar bruiser, an' this was w'ot give him sich a big advantage when he had the fight with the other bucks 'bout the chieftainship of the tribe."

"The rest wasn't used to fighting in that way, an' so he kinder astonished them."

"Do you think there is danger of my being attacked by the reds between here and Hardtack City?"

"Wal, it is hard to say," Rattlesnake Smith replied, with a doubtful shake of the head.

"They were cavorting in the neighborhood of the camp when I left, an' all the miners had come in from the outlying deestriacts."

"It seems likely, then, that they may keep a watch on the trail," the sport observed, reflectively.

"That is the game they ginerally play, an' I tell you, pard, it will be wise for you to keep yer peepers wide open."

"I usually do," Blake replied.

"Wal, so-long. I must be going. I'll see you ag'in, in Hardtack, if you git through all right!" And with this declaration the old scout departed.

The sport went on his way.

For ten minutes or thereabouts he allowed the mule to walk, while he carefully examined his weapons, so as to be sure that they were all in perfect working order.

Satisfied on this point he pushed the animal into a gallop again, and a couple of miles were soon covered.

Then the trail led over a vast prairie which was dotted here and there with little clumps of timber, "islands," as the frontiersmen say.

The sport shook his head as he noted the surroundings.

It was just the place for an ambush.

"If the red-skins are lying in wait for travelers anywhere along the trail, I don't believe they can find a better spot for their business than this broken prairie!" the Fresh declared.

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when from behind one of the clumps of timber came three mounted Indians, a most disagreeable surprise.

CHAPTER IV. THE GROUND HOG.

THE Fresh was prompt to take action.

Fifty paces in advance there was a bunch of a dozen or so of scrub oaks, which grew close to the water's edge, and to this clump of trees the sport hastened.

The red-skins were a good thousand yards away, so the Fresh had no difficulty in gaining the shelter of the timber, as the warriors were not near enough to interfere with his movements.

In fact, they had no suspicion of what he intended to do until he was under the oaks and dismounted.

Blake led the mule to the edge of the stream, then tied the beast to one of the trees; and as the ground shelved down toward the water, the mule was well under cover.

Then the sport unslung his rifle and returned to the edge of the clump, in order to see what the Indians were doing.

Another unwelcome surprise awaited him.

The three Indians had swelled into about fifty.

The warriors came from behind the different prairie islands where they had been concealed, and in an irregular line the red-skins surrounded the particular clump of timber where the Fresh had taken refuge, the line extending in a half-circle from river to river, so that the Indians were in the rear of the adventurer as well as in his front.

"It is just as I suspected when I first caught sight of the red devils!" the Fresh exclaimed. "I have ridden into an ambushade—a regular trap! The red-skins were concealed in the timber, but they were careful not to show themselves until I had got past the rear guard—until I was surrounded so that I couldn't escape."

"Well, I am in the snare surely enough," he continued. "Still, they have not got me yet, although I must admit that there doesn't seem to be much chance for me, for fifty or sixty against one is fearful odds."

By this time the red-skins had advanced to within about five hundred yards, well within range, and Blake thought it was about time to let them understand that they had come quite far enough.

All the warriors were armed to the teeth, and wore the war-paint with the exception of one old brave, who was decked out in the most fantastic style, and the moment the Fresh got his eyes on this gaudily-attired red-man he conjectured that he was one of the great medicine-men of the tribe.

"That is the fellow that I must plug at the first pop!" the sport exclaimed.

"If I can lay the great medicine-man out the rest will be apt to get an idea that I am a pretty tough customer to handle."

"I will do the square thing by the bucks though, and will not plug them without warning," he continued.

Stepping out from beneath the oaks, he shook his rifle in the air in a menacing way, and then brought it up to his shoulder.

It was evident that the sport's pantomime was perfectly understood, for the moment the butt of his rifle reached his shoulder every red-skin, with the exception of the old medicine-man, sought shelter behind the body of his horse, but the old fellow gave the Indian sign of peace by holding up both his hands with the palms outward, and at the same time he started his horse toward the white man.

"Aha! the old man wants a talk!" the sport exclaimed. "All right! I haven't any objection so long as the rest of the red bucks don't try any funny business."

It will be seen from this that the sport had very little confidence in the good faith of the red-men.

The Fresh kept a wary eye upon the Indians while the old medicine-man came on.

But it really seemed as if the red-skins did not intend to take any unfair advantage, for the majority of them took seats upon the ground, while the rest leaned upon their saddles and gazed with curious eyes upon the white man who was presenting so bold a front.

With his rifle in the hollow of his arm, the sport waited for the coming of the old savage.

As the aged chief advanced, the sport came to the conclusion that he was about the ugliest-looking specimen of an Indian that he had ever encountered, being a misshapen fellow, with a head much too large for his squat, broad body, and so fat that the grease seemed to be fairly oozing out of him. When he arrived within ten feet of the sport, he halted, and nodded in what he intended to be a friendly way, while a grim smile appeared on his ugly face.

"How?" he ejaculated.

This is the common opening salutation among the red-skins of the West, and signifies "How do you do?"

Blake was no tenderfoot, and was therefore well acquainted with the customs of the wild red-men of the West, so he immediately replied:

"I'm pretty well; how are you?"

"Nish-ma-wah, the Ground Hog, is the great medicine-man of the Sioux nation!" the old fellow declared in a lofty way.

"Well, you look as if you might be a great man," the sport remarked in a reflective manner. "But I can't say, though, that I am particularly pleased to make your acquaintance under the present circumstances."

"My white brother is in a bad place," the old Indian observed.

"Yes, but I have been in worse," the sport replied, in a careless way, which caused a look of surprise to appear on the face of the red-skin.

For a moment the old medicine-man surveyed the sport as though he did not know exactly what to make of him, and then he turned and ran his eyes over the line of Indian warriors which circled around the little clump of timber in which the white man had taken refuge.

"Does not my white brother see that he is surrounded by the red warriors of the great Sioux nation?" he exclaimed, with a comprehensive wave of his hand, indicating the semicircle of armed men.

"Oh, yes, I see them, all right. I am in full possession of my senses, and really blessed with remarkably good eyesight."

"My white brother is a stranger?"

"Yes, I have never been in this section before."

"But he surely knows that the Sioux warriors are great fighting men, and that, surrounded as he is by the best braves in the nation, he stands as little chance to beat the red chiefs off when they close in for the attack as the wounded buffalo, disabled and cut off from the rest of the herd by a fierce pack of great gray prairie wolves does to beat off the merciless brutes who snap at his heels," the old medicine-man declared with all the sonorous eloquence of a renowned Indian orator.

"That is very nicely put, my dusky friend," the sport replied. "But, unfortunately for your side of the argument, you have not fairly stated the case."

"That your red warriors represent the wolves, is all right enough, but I am not the same as the wounded buffalo."

"Very far indeed am I from being disabled. On the contrary, I am in full possession of all my powers; am well armed, and provided with plenty of ammunition, although you have the advantage of big odds—about fifty to one, I should say—yet I am in a pretty strong position here, and the chances, it seems to me, are great that I will be able to lay out ten or a dozen, maybe fifteen or twenty of your braves, before you can wipe me out."

"There is the state of affairs in a nutshell!" the Fresh continued.

"The chances certainly seem good that you can take my scalp, but you are going to lose from ten to twenty of your warriors in the operation, and really, when you come to look at the speculation in a business light, I should think you would come to the conclusion that the scheme will not pay."

A grim smile appeared on the face of the old Indian as he listened to the words of the sharp.

"My white brother has an old head on young shoulders," he declared. "But is he not trying to scare the red-man with big words?" he added, shrewdly.

"Oh, I suppose you mean to insinuate that I will not fight?"

"It would be utter madness for you to do so!" the medicine-man declared.

"I reckon not!" Blake retorted. "But if you have a doubt as to whether I mean what I say or not, go back to your warriors and bid them come on; then it will not take but a few minutes to settle the question."

The old Indian shook his head, being evidently amazed by the pluck displayed by the other; but the sharp was acting on the knowledge of the Indian character which he possessed.

Although the red-skins are as brave as any race of men that ever trod the earth, yet they will never attack at a disadvantage if it is possible for them to arrange the matter otherwise, and they deem it the height of wisdom to contrive so that the enemy will not have any chance for their lives.

"The white chief talks big—he has the heart of the grizzly bear, but the Sioux warriors are not fools; they will not give the lives of ten men, or even two, to take a single scalp."

"That is where they are wise!" Blake interjected.

"Has the white chief food so that he can stand a siege?" asked the old Indian, with a grim smile.

"Well, I reckon I can hold out for a couple of days all right without being troubled much," Blake replied, in a confident way. "And in that time assistance may come."

But although the sport spoke in such a hopeful way, in truth he had not a morsel to eat, for he had eaten up his supply at his noon halt, expecting to reach the mining-camp in time for supper.

"And the night?" quoth, the old medicine-man, waving his brawny hand above his head.

"When the night comes with no moon to light up the earth, will the white chief be able to make nine or ten of the red warriors bite the dust when they rush to the attack?"

Blake for a moment, hesitated; the red-skin had scored a point.

After dark it would be feasible for the Indians to approach so near, without his being able to discover them, that it would be possible for them to overpower him with a grand rush, and the probabilities were that he would not be able to damage them much.

The old medicine-man was intently watching the face of the sport, and he smiled in a sarcastic way when he saw that his words had produced a decided impression.

"I reckon that in the darkness your bucks would have a big advantage," Blake admitted.

"Why not yield then?" the old savage demanded. "The red chiefs merely want the white man as a hostage."

"How is that?"

"The big chief in command at Fort Scott has seized upon two young Sioux warriors and accuses them of having stolen his horses, but it is a lie, for the horses were stolen by white men and the big blue-coated chief knows it too."

"Why then does he bring such an accusation?"

"Because he hates the Laughing Horse, the great chief of the Musselshell Sioux and as he knows these two young braves are dear to him he has seized upon them, and now the Laughing Horse is on the war-path; five hundred warriors can be brought into the field, and the big blue-coated chief at Camp Scott will find that he has stepped upon a snake which has the power to turn and sting unto the death."

For a moment the sport meditated upon the situation; his was a mind which worked quickly and it did not take him long to come to a conclusion.

That the moment the dusk of the evening set in the Indians would be able to overpower him was certain, and even the poor privilege of being able to sell his life dearly would be denied him.

Under the circumstances then would it not be wise for him to surrender?

It did not take him long to come to the conclusion that it would, and he so announced to the old Indian.

CHAPTER V. A PRISONER.

THE medicine-man received the intelligence with decided satisfaction.

"It is wise of my white brother to yield," he declared. "The Ground Hog gives his word that he shall be well taken care of, and if the big white chief at Fort Scott does not harm

the two Sioux warriors no harm will come to him."

"Oh, there isn't any danger of the commander of Fort Scott damaging the bucks, although he may be certain that they are the men who got away with his horses. They will have to go through a regular trial in a court, and even if they are convicted, horse-stealing is not a hanging matter, so they are not in any particular danger."

"If the two warriors are killed, the Laughing Horse will make the Musselshell run red with the blood of the white man!" the old medicine-man announced.

"If your chief is wise he will not buck against the white men, for though he may kick up considerable of a row for a while, yet it will end in the downfall of his tribe," Blake declared.

"You are no chicken," the sport continued, "and from your experience you ought to know that the Sioux cannot hope to succeed in the long run if they go in to clean out the whites."

"The game has been tried twenty times and the end is always the same."

"For a time the red chiefs carry everything before them, and then the white soldiers pour in, and the red bucks are crushed by overwhelming numbers."

"The Laughing Horse is the greatest warrior that the Sioux nation has ever known, and if he takes the war-path against the white-skins he will make them run as the wolves scatter when the mountain lion descends to the prairies!"

Despite this grandiloquent announcement, there was a peculiar look upon the face of the old medicine-man which gave the sport the impression that he was delivering a set speech which he had got by heart, and that he was not so certain about its being correct as he might be.

"The warrior may be all that you say, but if he is as great as all the big fighting men of the Sioux nation rolled into one he will never be able to whip the white men, for the odds are too big. But go back to your red bucks and tell them that, like Captain Scott's coon, I am ready to come down."

"You are a wise brave and the Ground Hog will do all he can for you," the old fellow remarked as he turned to rejoin the Indians.

Blake untied his mule, mounted and rode out of the timber, and as he did so the Indians, who had gathered in a bunch at a signal from the Ground Hog, came forward to meet him.

When the red chiefs surrounded the spot he greeted them with a courtly bow, seemingly not at all incommoded by the situation.

At the head of the savage host, by the side of the old medicine-man, rode a brawny young warrior whose gayly decorated attire denoted that he was a great chief, and Blake immediately jumped to the conclusion that this was the head of the Musselshell Sioux, the Laughing Horse, whose overweening vanity was about to involve his people in a war which would surely end in the destruction of the tribe.

The young warrior had an evil-looking face, and bore such a strong resemblance to the old medicine-man that the sport conjectured that the two were related.

As we have said, the young chieftain was a big, brawny fellow who looked as if he was built for a warrior, but the sport could not discover in his face any of the signs which denote intelligence and ability.

"Nothing but a big brute who depends upon bone and muscle and not on brains," was the Fresh's opinion of the Sioux chieftain.

"Take the weapons away from the white dog!" the young warrior commanded, speaking English as fluently as though it were his native tongue.

The order was immediately obeyed, but though the red chiefs searched the sport thoroughly they failed to find a small six-shooter which the Fresh had concealed in a secret pocket in the bosom of his shirt.

"Blue Dog and Spotted Calf take charge of the white-skin and if he attempts to escape let your knives find his heart!" the chief commanded after the prisoner had been searched.

Then the party took up the line of march, the Fresh being placed in the center of the cavalcade with two brawny red warriors riding by his side.

The party kept to the trail by the river for about five miles, then they crossed the stream and struck off over the prairie toward the northwest.

Blake kept his eyes open, and after a while came to the conclusion that the party had circled around Hardtack City, and were now to the north of the camp.

Shortly after the sport came to this decision, a trail was reached which showed evident signs of travel.

"This must be the road from the northwest into Hardtack City," the Fresh mused. "The one which comes from Diamond City by way of White Sulphur Springs."

The cavalcade followed the trail for about a mile until they came to a rolling prairie, which here and there was covered with heavy timber,

and as soon as the trees were reached, the Indians proceeded to conceal themselves amid the shrubbery.

"Another ambush!" the sharp muttered, and from the way in which some of the red-skins examined the ground, and then held a consultation with the chief, Blake got the idea that the trail was a stage route, and the red-skins were discussing whether or not the coach had passed.

The Indians finally came to the conclusion that the stage had not gone by. This was clear from the fact that they arranged their ambushade with exceeding care after the consultation ended.

"The coach is gone up," the Fresh muttered.

He had been placed with the main body of the red-skins, who had found concealment in a large clump of oaks a few hundred feet from the trail.

"Nothing short of a well-armed body of fifty or sixty men could hope to beat off these red devils," the sport murmured.

"The Laughing Horse is out for business this time, and has brought so big a force with him that he is certain to make his scoop all right."

Blake's meditations were interrupted by the approach of the stage, which made its appearance at the upper end of the prairie.

On came the coach, drawn by a pair of extra good horses, and the driver cracked his long whip merrily, in blissful unconsciousness of the peril which awaited him.

The red-skins allowed the stage to come on until it reached the very center of the ambushade, and then the Laughing Horse, with a loud yell, rode out into the trail, and this was the signal for the Indians to make their appearance.

The driver, a tall, gaunt, middle-aged man, with a face tanned by exposure to the weather to a hue almost as dark as the color of the Sioux who now surrounded him, immediately pulled up his horses.

There was a rifle by his side, and belted to his waist were a couple of revolvers, but he did not attempt to draw his weapons.

A single glance at the multitude of painted chiefs who swarmed around the coach had satisfied the driver that it would be a piece of supreme folly for him to attempt to offer resistance.

The coach had come to a halt directly opposite to the clump of trees wherein the Fresh stood, and when the Indians rode forth he accompanied them.

The Laughing Horse was in command of this detachment, and as the chief led his band right up to the stage as soon as it halted, the sport was in a position to see all that occurred.

There were only two passengers in the coach, a well-dressed elderly gentleman, who looked like a professional man, and a young lady of twenty-five, or thereabouts, a good-looking young woman, with gray-blue eyes and blonde hair.

She would really have been exceedingly handsome if her features had not been a trifle coarse; one of the masculine girls who look so much like a man that it is possible for them to assume male attire and masquerade successfully as the lords of creation.

The passengers thrust their heads out of the windows as soon as the coach stopped, anxious to discover the reason for the movement, but as soon as they perceived the painted, feather-garnished chiefs, hastening toward the coach in all directions, they quickly withdrew to the interior of the coach.

"Hello! wot are you up to, Laughing Horse?" exclaimed the driver, nodding to the Sioux chieftain, as though he was an old acquaintance.

"The Laughing Horse is on the war-path, and is going to make it hot for the white-skins!" the brave replied.

"Wal, now, I want to know!" the driver exclaimed, in accents of surprise.

"It is the truth," the warrior replied.

"The big white chief at Fort Scott has seized upon two of the young men of the Musselshell Sioux and Laughing Horse has gone on the war-path so as to show the big blue-coated chief that he is not the only one who can give hard blows."

"I heered that the kurnel had jumped on two of your bucks for hoss-stealing, but I didn't reckon the fuss would amount to much," the driver remarked in a reflective way.

"The big white brave will find that when he crosses the trail of the chief of the Musselshell Sioux he has a man to deal with!" the red warrior declared in an arrogant way.

"Thar's no discount on you, chief, particularly when you happen to have five or six hundred warriors at your back," the driver declared.

"The big white chief has seized upon two of my young men and because he has big guns behind his tree walls he laughs at the red-men when they call for the release of their brothers; but war is a game that two can play at, as the big white chief will find."

"He has shut up two of my young men and threatens to hang them unless the horses are returned which he says have been stolen by them. But it is all a lie!" the Indian leader continued, fiercely.

"The horses were not stolen by my young

men—they will not be brought back and if the big white chief dares to hang the two braves the Sioux warriors will take a fearful vengeance."

"Oh, see hyer, chief, I reckon that you ain't got this hyer thing straight!" the driver declared. "I know that the kurnel is a mighty tough old rooster, and allers carries things with a mighty high hand, but hoss-stealing ain't no hanging matter, you know, and I reckon your young men ain't in no danger of stretching a rope yet awhile."

"The Laughing Horse will make sure that no harm will come to his young men!" the chief replied with a great deal of dignity.

"One white-skin is already in his power, and now he will take this pale-face squaw and the white man in the coach; that will be three white-skins that the Musselshell Sioux will hold, and if the big white chief hangs my young men I will hang the pale-faces too."

The driver looked amazed, the lady in the coach gave a little shriek, and the old gentleman stuck his head out of window.

"This is a terrible outrage, chief!" he declared, "and I must protest against it! You are very unwise to commit such an act, for the Great Father at Washington will soon send his soldiers after you, and in the end you will be made to pay very dearly for the deed!"

A look of contempt appeared on the massive features of the Sioux chieftain as he listened to the speech.

"Bah!" he cried, in arrogant insolence, "does the white man think that he can frighten the Sioux warriors with a few big words?"

"Look around you! This is the red-man's land, and the white-skins have no business here. Let them go back to where they belong! Their tread scares away the game, and the smoke of their lodges spoils the pure air."

"The white men are a set of lying cheats. The big white chief at Fort Scott is crazy for the yellow metal which the pale-faces dig out of the earth, and for which they would sell their souls. He thinks the Sioux warriors know where the yellow metal lies hid in the mountains, and so he pretends that he thinks they have stolen his horses, therefore he seizes upon the young braves and threatens to hang them, but if they would tell where the yellow metal can be found, he would let them go quickly enough."

"Oh, you are away out thar, chief," the driver declared. "The kurnel ain't no sich man."

"The Sioux chief knows what he knows, and no white-skin can fool him!" the red brave declared.

"The white squaw and the gray-haired chief must go with the Laughing Horse to his village on the Musselshell."

"If the big white chief at Fort Scott will allow my two young men to go free, then I will not keep my prisoners, but if my braves are harmed then the white-skins will suffer!"

"This is monstrous!" the lady declared to her companion, speaking in a subdued tone, so that the chief should not hear her.

The Laughing Horse, after finishing his speech had turned to his warriors to order two spare horses to be brought up for the accommodation of the prisoners.

"Yes, but we are in such a condition that we can not help ourselves," the old gentleman replied, nervously, evidently much more excited than the girl, who was decidedly more indignant than alarmed.

"I do not suppose that there is really any danger, though," the young lady remarked.

"It is the intention of this red brute to hold us as hostages for his young men, as he calls them, and when the officer in command of Fort Scott discovers that we are in the hands of the Indians, he will undoubtedly speedily devise some way to rescue us."

"Yes, I should think so," the old gentleman responded, but it was plain from the way he spoke that he was very much alarmed.

The horses were brought forward, then the passengers were compelled to get out of the coach and mount the steeds.

"Now say to the big white chief that I have three pale-faces in my village, and if he harms a hair on the head of either one of my young men, I will give the white-skins to the torture, and then take their scalps to adorn my wigwam," Laughing Horse declared, addressing the driver.

The Jehu said he would deliver the message and drove on, while the Indians rode off to the west.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE INDIAN VILLAGE.

THE Indian chief had arranged matters so that the prisoners were not brought in contact with each other on the march.

Blake went with the advance guard, while the lady and gentleman were in the center of the main body.

But when the Indian encampment was reached the old gentleman and Blake were placed in the same wigwam.

The Indian village was situated on the north fork of the Musselshell River, in a broken and irregular country; and though the valley in

which the encampment was situated was a pleasant and fertile one, abounding in sweet grasses, and the woods in the neighborhood filled with game, while the river swarmed with fish, yet the approach to the valley was a difficult one, and from the nature of the ground, a few men could make a successful stand against a large force.

Blake did not fail to notice this fact as he rode up the valley, for he was one of the men accustomed to use his eyes, and after being placed in the wigwam he remarked to his companion that the red-skins had selected a spot for their village where it would bother the troops to get at them.

The old gentleman was not a military man, and, in fact, was nearly as ignorant as a child about any matters of the kind, so he promptly expressed his astonishment that the sport should believe the soldiers would have any difficulty in making short work of the half-naked savages, as he termed the red-skins.

"Well, I am not particularly surprised at your want of knowledge," Blake observed.

"You are a tenderfoot, and, of course, are not posted in regard to matters and things in a region like this.

"These Indians don't trouble their heads much about extra clothing, for a fact, but when it comes to war, you know, it isn't the clothing that counts.

"If you are a judge of weapons, you could have perceived that the bucks are splendidly armed, better even than the regular soldiers, and each man, too, prides himself upon his skill in using his tools. War is the trade which the red-skins most admire, and to which they are trained from boyhood; in fact, a kid of ten or twelve will do his best to fight like a man if he gets a chance; so, really, when you come to cipher the thing right down, these Sioux are about as good food for powder as can be scared up in the world."

"You amaze me," the old gentleman declared. "I should not have thought that such fellows stood any chance at all when opposed to regular soldiers."

"You make a big mistake when you reckon in that way!" the sport declared. "And if you consult any old army man, he will tell you that these red-skins can fight like devils after their own fashion."

"They don't come up to the scratch and fight in regular lines, but they usually contrive to get there all the same."

"Being from the East, you are not posted in regard to these red-skins, but I have had a deal of experience with them, and therefore I know their games pretty well."

"I must plead ignorance, of course, for I do not know anything about the brutes, and if I can only succeed in getting safely out of this scrape, you can depend upon it that I will never again put myself in a position so the red-skins can get at me!" the old gentleman affirmed.

"Well, as far as getting out of the scrape goes, I do not think there is much danger but what we will get out all right," the sport remarked in a thoughtful way.

"Do you really think so?" the other exclaimed, his face brightening up.

"Oh, yes, I do not believe that we are in any particular danger."

"You most certainly take a great weight from my mind!" the other declared.

"I figure the matter out in this way," the sport explained. "If there was any likelihood of the colonel in command of Fort Scott—Poindexter, I believe is his name—putting these two red horse-thieves, whom he has captured, to death, then the chances are big that this Sioux chief might retaliate by taking our scalps."

"Yes, but the Government would surely hold him to a fearful account!" the old gentleman declared, getting dreadfully uneasy at the bare thought.

"Oh, yes, that is true enough. By the act the Laughing Horse would practically sign his own death-warrant, but he hasn't sense enough to know that, you see; he is a young buck who has just attained the chieftainship of the tribe, and as a natural consequence he imagines that he is the biggest kind of a son of a gun—in fact, I suppose he is just spoiling for a chance to let the world at large see what a deuce of a fellow he is."

"Ah yes, I understand," the old gentleman said with a deep sigh. "But I wish to Heaven that he had waited until I got out of the country before he started in to show his ability."

"Man proposes and fate disposes, you know," the sharp observed with the air of a philosopher. "We cannot always regulate these things to our satisfaction, much as we would like to do it."

"Yes, I am aware of that, and now, too late, I realize what a donkey I made of myself in coming on this western trip; but then I knew that my fee would be a large one, and, really, I had no idea that there was any particular danger to be encountered. If I had known before I started what I know now I would have taken a princely sum indeed to have tempted me to come from New York on any such wild goose chase."

"You are from New York then?"

"Yes."

"I am a New York boy too, although I have made my home in the West for years."

"Well, I judged from the way in which you conversed that you were not a Westerner."

"No, I was born and brought up in New York."

"I am glad to meet you, Mr—?"

"Blake, Jackson Blake! That is my handle, as they say out in this country."

"My name is Gregory De Witt, and I am a lawyer by profession, the confidential agent and business man of the young lady who was in the coach with me, Miss Arabella Vanderhoven."

"The young woman must be pretty well fixed, as the saying is, to need the exclusive services of such a man as yourself," the sharp remarked, a little surprised by the circumstances.

"Oh, yes, she is very wealthy," the lawyer replied. "She comes of one of the old New York families, her property interests in the metropolis are enormous, and I assure you that it takes all my time to look after the business details; my office is no sinecure."

"What on earth is such a woman doing out in this country?" the Fresh exclaimed in wonder.

"Well, in order to explain that it is necessary you should understand something about Miss Vanderhoven," the old gentleman replied.

The sport nodded.

"She is an extremely odd young lady, remarkably strong-minded and self-willed, and it is not strange when you consider that she was born with a golden spoon in her mouth, to use the old saying."

"Her parents died when she was only a child and she was brought up by her uncle, who was not wealthy as it happened; his branch of the family had succeeded in getting rid of the money which had descended to these modern Vanderhovens from the old Dutchman who founded the family."

"He looked upon the girl as a sort of princess, as she would inherit so much money when she came of age, and so she was brought up like one."

"Nine girls out of ten would have been completely spoiled by such a bringing up."

"Very true—not a doubt about that!" the old gentleman assented.

"But, really, without attempting to flatter the young lady, I must say that she is one girl picked out of ten thousand."

"That is high praise."

"It is deserved!" the lawyer declared, emphatically. "If Miss Vanderhoven had not been the heiress to a colossal fortune she would surely have made a name for herself by her own exertions, for she is wonderfully gifted in half a dozen ways, really possesses an astonishing amount of talent, and there isn't anything of the spoiled darling of fortune about her."

"In fact, if you happened to meet Miss Vanderhoven, without being acquainted with her position in life, the chances are great that you would take her to be some prominent woman's rights advocate, for she is decidedly strong-minded, and not at all afraid of allowing everybody to know it, for she is a very fluent speaker, and has a happy faculty of putting a great deal of sense in a very few words."

"What on earth is such a woman doing out in a country like this?" Blake inquired, in wonder.

"Thereby hangs a tale!" the lawyer replied.

"I do not hesitate to speak to you about the matter, for it is possible you may be able to give some valuable information."

"I shall be glad to oblige you if I can."

"Of course you will be well paid if you can afford any aid," the lawyer remarked.

"Oh, that is all right."

"Since we have been conversing an idea has entered my mind that you would be just the man to attend to this business, if you are at liberty to undertake it," the old gentleman observed, examining the sharp with a critical eye.

"Well, I reckon I am open to make an engagement," Blake replied. "I am my own master just at present, and was on my way to these new gold fields at Hardtack City with the idea of speculating, when these red-skins gobbled me."

"The affair is a peculiar one, and a discreet, capable man is required to handle the matter properly," the old gentleman declared.

"I am certainly discreet; there isn't any doubt about that, but in regard to my capabilities a trial would show just what kind of a man I am," the Fresh suggested.

"Oh, I feel satisfied you will fill the bill to perfection if you care to undertake the matter."

"Go ahead with your explanation, and as soon as I understand what you want me to do I will tell you in a 'brace of shakes,' whether I can go into the thing or not."

"It will not take me long to acquaint you with all the facts in the premises," the lawyer remarked.

"Fire away!"

"As I told you, Miss Vanderhoven was brought up by her uncle, Jacob, who was a man in only moderate circumstances," the old gentleman began. "Jacob Vanderhoven and his

wife, Sarah, thought fully as much of Miss Arabella as though she had been their own daughter; they had but one child, a boy, named Jack, who was three years older than Miss Arabella.

"The two were brought up together, and when Miss Arabella was sixteen, or seventeen years old the pair had such a liking for each other that it was the general opinion that a match would be made between the two."

"Very natural under the circumstances."

"From what I know of the affair I feel certain that young Jack could have secured the heiress if he had managed matters rightly."

"You see, I was in a position to know just how everything went on, for I was the confidential agent of Miss Arabella's father, and when he died I was empowered by his will to look after the estate."

"Ah, yes, I see."

"Personally I was not in favor of a marriage between Jack Vanderhoven and the heiress, for I had watched the young man pretty narrowly, and was satisfied he was not the kind of a husband to make her happy."

"I did not take the trouble to openly interfere in the matter, for I am a man who believes in attending strictly to my own business, although in a case like this I most certainly would have overstepped my rule if I had not had faith that Miss Arabella would have sense enough to find out the truth for herself."

"What was he trouble with the young man?" Blake asked.

"Well, he was naturally weak and easily led astray," the old gentleman replied.

"All his father had to depend upon was a certain fixed income, just about enough to comfortably support him, but young Jack, when he got to be of age, instead of studying for a profession, or going into trade, so that he could make a living for himself, developed into that most worthless of all creatures, 'a man about town,' whose chief ambition was to be the best dressed man of his set."

"Yes, I understand, and as he hadn't plenty of money at his back it did not take him long to get into difficulties."

"That was the result, and then he indulged in the small vices of his fashionable friends, drank pretty heavily, gambled a little, and the natural consequence was that the first thing he knew he was over head and ears in debt."

"That is the way it always works when a man tries to be a high-roller without having plenty of money."

"Old Jacob was an easy-going sort of man, who thought a great deal of his boy, and so he paid his debts three or four times, although he had to pinch pretty well to do it, and each time Jack promised to be careful in the future."

"Ah, yes, but young men with weak backbones never keep such promises. I have known hundreds of such cases; they can't withstand temptation."

"The end came at last. Jack got in to the tune of five thousand dollars, and knowing that he could not hope to get such an amount out of his father was unwise enough to apply to Miss Arabella for aid."

"Then the cat was out of the bag!"

"Exactly, and though the young man told a very plausible story of how he had got in over his head before he knew it, and vowed that if he got out all right this time he would never be such a fool again, the young lady was too keen to be deceived."

"Although reared as became a great heiress, with all her wishes indulged to their fullest extent, yet she knew the value of money as well as the closest miser that ever lived, and the idea that Jack should run in debt to the tune of five thousand dollars for mere idle business—she took pains to put him through a regular cross-examination, mind you—astounded her."

"I should imagine so."

"Before she would agree to help him out she sent for me and requested I should examine into the matter. I did so, and when I made my report, although I rather glossed the matter over and made it as light for the young man as I could, still I did not hesitate to say just about what the trouble was, so she was completely disgusted by the young man's foolishness, and after her eyes were opened to his folly I do not believe she would have been willing to have married him if he had been the only man on earth."

"A very natural conclusion for such a young woman, as you have described the lady to be, to arrive at," the sport remarked.

"And in her earnest straight-forward way she immediately set her wits to work to devise some way to reform the young man."

"Yes, women are natural-born reformers."

"She did me the honor to ask my advice about the matter, and I told her that I did not think there was any chance of the young gentleman altering his way of life so long as he remained in New York, for his habits and associates would be pretty certain to exert too strong an influence over him, and the temptations which he had been unable to resist would be certain to overcome him again."

"That is correct reasoning beyond a doubt," the sport asserted.

"Man is the creature of habit," he continued,

"and he must be a strong-minded fellow indeed who is able to rise superior to his associations."

"That was my argument, and although, really, the lesson seemed to be such a severe one that the young man would not be apt to forget it for a long time, yet knowing as I did that his father had paid his debts three or four times under strict promise from Jack that he would reform, I was not hopeful that the young man would lead a different life if he was pulled out of this new scrape."

"The odds were a hundred to one against it!"

"Miss Arabella had arrived at the same conclusion," the old lawyer continued. "And in her active, practical way set to work to devise some means to redeem the young man, and put him in a path which would lead to a steady income."

"She had cogitated earnestly about the matter, and finally came to the conclusion that Jack's removal to the West, there to grow up with the country, would do the business."

"A wise decision."

"I thought so too, and did not hesitate to say as much," so, after due deliberation, Miss Arabella came to a determination.

She would pay Jack's debts and allow him twenty-five dollars per week, provided he would leave New York and take up his quarters in the West—she was not particular where he went—anywhere he chose where there was a prospect that he could do well, and she further said when he found a business which promised to be profitable, and which he thought he would like, she would find a reasonable amount of money to purchase it."

"A remarkably liberal proposition!" the sport declared. "Not one man out of a thousand ever gets such a chance."

"This was not to be a gift, you understand, merely a boon which the young man was to pay back when he was able."

"Yes, a delicate way of putting it," the Fresh remarked with a sarcastic smile. "But the young fellow understood, of course, that he would never be pressed for payment."

"Oh, yes, undoubtedly."

"He was glad to accept, I presume?"

"Certainly! I arranged the details of the matter. His debts were paid and he started west on an exploring tour."

"Now to do the young man full justice," the old lawyer continued, "I will say I firmly believe that when he left New York he fully intended to turn over a new leaf."

"He did not tarry in Chicago nor any of the rest of the prominent Western cities, as he might have been tempted to do, for by the terms of the agreement he could have looked for an occupation in one of the prominent towns if he had so desired, but he really acted as if he wanted to avoid temptation, and so came straight to the extreme West."

"By letter he kept me informed of his movements, and after considerable journeyings here and there he finally came to these new gold-diggings, and the last letter I received from him was dated at Hardtack City."

"I received that letter on a Monday morning and on that night his father suddenly died."

CHAPTER VII.

JACK'S HEIR.

"THAT was a calamity indeed!" Blake declared.

"Yes, and the blow came so suddenly, and without warning, that the shock was much greater than it would have been if notice had been given," the lawyer remarked.

"The old gentleman seemed to be in perfect health, and had just finished a hearty meal when the stroke came which hurried him into another world."

"Miss Arabella took the affliction dreadfully to heart, for she had a sincere love for her uncle, and then too she felt badly because Jack was absent, and for that she blamed herself, as she was responsible for his going West."

"Yes, people who are conscientious are apt to be troubled by such a matter, although really they ought not to be."

"I used the telegraph to the nearest point to the mining-camp, with instructions to send the message through, regardless of cost, as soon as possible."

"Of course, I understood that it would take eight or ten days before the young man could reach New York, even if the dispatch was hurried forward with all possible haste."

"Yes, it takes time to put such things through in the wild West," the Fresh observed.

"I confidently expected though to receive a message from Jack within a week at the outside, as I had requested him to answer as soon as possible, and therefore when ten days passed by without my either hearing from or seeing the young man I began to believe that my message could not have reached him."

"Yes, that was a natural conclusion."

"I telegraphed again, and made arrangements at the New York office to have the dispatch sent through by a special messenger with instructions for the messenger to report whether he succeeded in finding the man or not."

"You wanted to be certain."

"Exactly! In due time a report was received from the messenger. He had found Jack, delivered the dispatch and the young man had started for New York."

"You took the proper method of getting at your man," Blake remarked.

I was anxious for him to come so that his father's estate could be settled up. The old gentleman did not leave much, only ten thousand dollars, and the son was the sole heir."

"Quite enough to give him an excellent start. Had he gone into anything in Hardtack City?"

"On that point I am in ignorance. I only received a single letter from him after he came to the town, and it was a brief epistle, merely saying he had arrived safely in Hardtack City—that it was a busy, hustling camp, full of business, and he thought he would be able to get into something which would pay him very well. Two weeks after I received this missive his father died."

"He would hardly had time to have done much, and then too he would have had to draw on you for money if he had gone into a business venture," the Fresh remarked, reflectively.

"Yes, but no such demand reached me," the old gentleman affirmed.

"After receiving the message that Jack was on his way to New York, I looked for his appearance at any moment after five or six days had elapsed, and you can judge of my surprise when a young, and rather good-looking woman came into my office one morning and announced that she was Mrs. Jack Vanderhoven."

"Well, well, that must have been a surprise."

"It was indeed! As I stated she was a good-looking young woman, but had a bold, forward way which impressed me very unfavorably."

"She noticed that I was astonished, and said in an extremely flippant manner that she supposed she was about the last person in the world I expected to see."

"I replied that it was certainly the truth for I was not aware of Jack's marriage."

"You will find that I am his wife, fast enough!" she exclaimed, in the peculiar way which was so disagreeable to me."

"Jack couldn't come himself and so I had to. I understand the old gentleman left Jack quite a tidy bit of money."

"Yes, there is a small inheritance coming to the young gentleman," I replied. "But how does it happen that he did not come?" I asked.

"Jack couldn't come very well for he is dead," she answered.

"Ah, that must have rather astonished you!" the sport exclaimed.

"It did, I assure you!" the old lawyer replied, with an earnest shake of the head. "I don't think that I was ever more surprised in my life, and as soon as I recovered from my amazement I asked her to be good enough to give a full account of the matter."

"Certainly!" she exclaimed, "that is what I am here for."

"And then she told her story; it was a plain, straightforward one enough."

"She had met Jack in Hardtack City. He was drinking hard, and making a fool of himself generally; he boarded at the same house with herself, and when he fell sick she nursed him."

"He apparently got well, and was so grateful for the care she had taken of him, that nothing short of her becoming his wife would satisfy him, and so, although she really did not care much about him, for she saw that he was a weak sort of fellow with 'no sand,' as she phrased it, yet when she listened to his talk about what a good family he came of in New York, and how much money he would have when his father died, she came to the conclusion, as she honestly admitted, that it would be a good speculation for her to marry him."

"She was frank enough!" Blake declared.

"Oh, yes; I must give her the credit of saying that she was by far the most outspoken woman I ever encountered."

"She did not hesitate to declare that if it had not been for the 'yarns'—the woman was addicted to the use of all sorts of slang words, you understand—for the big yarns which Jack told her about his New York kindred, she would never have consented to become his wife, but as she thought there was a chance for her to make something, she agreed to the union, and they were married."

"Well, judging from the description that you gave of the young fellow, the tale of the woman does not seem to be an improbable one," Blake observed in a thoughtful way.

"I regret to have to say that that was the opinion at which I arrived after thinking the matter over," the old lawyer declared, with a melancholy shake of the head.

"Jack Vanderhoven was just the man to become the victim of a dashing, unscrupulous adventurer, such as this woman evidently was, and although she had not presented any proof that her tale was truth, yet I felt pretty certain it was."

"Yes, from your description of the young man I should think he was just the kind of fellow to make a donkey of himself in this sort of way," the sharp remarked.

"I have never had any experience with

women of this kind, and so for a few moments I was really at a loss to determine just how to treat her," the old gentleman explained.

"I could perceive from her manner though that she had come prepared for a hostile reception, and was all ready for war."

"She did not think that her story would be credited and no doubt expected to be treated in an unhandsome fashion."

"Well, I presume that a great many men in your position would be pretty certain to receive such a woman in a manner which would be apt to make her feel uncomfortable," the Fresh observed, slowly and in a thoughtful way. "I am not a lawyer, and I don't know as I can lay claim to be a first-class business man, but it is my impression that when a man acts in that way he is making a mistake."

"Yes, yes, that is my opinion also. There is a deal of truth in the old-fashioned, homely saying that molasses catches more flies than vinegar."

"Undoubtedly!"

"It has always been my rule to treat every one with whom I come in contact in the most courteous manner, no matter what the condition in life of the party might be."

"An excellent rule."

"Well, it was not only my belief that it was good policy to act in that way, but naturally such a course was agreeable to me."

"Yes, I should imagine so."

"So, after the young woman finished her recital, and I thought the matter over in my mind for a few moments, I addressed her, speaking with as much respect as though she had been one of the first ladies in the land; I explained that although her story appeared on the surface to be perfectly correct, and I had no doubt in my own mind that it was so, yet as I was only an agent of the law, it would be necessary for her to bring forward certain proofs before she could be put in possession of her late husband's estate."

"How did she receive the information?" Blake asked, having become decidedly interested in the matter."

"She was evidently surprised, and did not know exactly what to make of it, and I could see from the suspicious way in which she looked at me that she had an idea I was not sincere in my statements—in fact, that I was preparing some sort of a trap for her."

"That was natural," the Fresh observed. "A woman of that kind who is up to all sorts of tricks herself is just the one to doubt the honesty of everybody with whom she comes in contact."

"At the same time such a woman ought to have been shrewd enough to understand that she could not hope to get hold of so large a sum as ten thousand dollars without being able to bring forward good legal proofs that she was entitled to receive it."

"She understood all about that, and had come provided with the necessary papers, which she promptly produced for my examination. First, was her marriage certificate, which showed that she, Pauline Kemperwell, had been married at Hardtack City by one Reverend Jabez Robinson to Jack Vanderhoven, then there was the statement of two witnesses who were present when the marriage took place, and an account, signed by the same two witnesses, of the death of Jack Vanderhoven, which occurred just as he was on the point of setting out for the East."

"If these witnesses can be depended upon, the proof seems to be sufficient," the sport remarked.

"Yes, and then, too, the young woman had some of the letters which I had written to Jack, which appears to be positive proof that the Jack Vanderhoven whom she had married was the Jack Vanderhoven who was entitled to the ten thousand dollars."

"The chain of evidence was certainly strong, yet it was quite possible for the whole thing to be false," Blake observed, in a reflective way.

"It would not be a difficult matter, you know, for any one who was acquainted with Jack Vanderhoven to work a smart game so as to get at his inheritance."

"Yes, I understand that, and my first impression was that the story was not true, but when I came to think the matter over, and reflected upon what a foolish, weak young man Jack was, I came to the conclusion the chances were great that the woman was telling the truth."

"After perusing the papers carefully, I gave them back to the young woman, at the same time remarking that there did not seem to be any doubt about her having a good case, but I further explained that it was not possible for me to settle the affair; it would be necessary for her to employ a lawyer, and make application in due form for the estate as the widow of the dead man; Jack Vanderhoven having departed this life, the law would have to be called upon to settle his affairs."

"Yes, of course."

"She retired with the remark that she had no idea that there would be so much trouble in gaining possession of what was justly hers."

"The young woman was prompt to act, though, for in a couple of hours I was waited upon by a lawyer, who announced that he had

been retained to look after the interest of the widow.

"She had employed a good man, too, although he was what is technically called a criminal lawyer, but he was a sharp fellow, in good standing, and there was no doubt that her interests would be carefully guarded."

"This legal gentleman, of course, understood my position. I took no interest in the matter, for it did not concern me who got the estate."

"I had supposed that Miss Arabella would inherit, as she was the legal heir, but to a woman possessed of her enormous wealth, even so much money as ten thousand dollars was but a trifle; and she would never think of contesting the matter if she was satisfied that some one else was justly entitled to the money."

"Yes, but women take queer notions sometimes," the Fresh remarked, shrewdly.

"And though the story of the girl who claimed to be Jack Vanderhoven's widow might appear to be an honest, straightforward tale, worthy of belief, to you, a practical, hard-headed business man, yet to my thinking the chances are big that the lady would have an entirely different opinion in regard to the matter."

The old gentleman nodded assent.

"It is evident that you are well acquainted with the peculiarities of the female sex," he observed.

"Yes, I have met with a few women in my time," the sport replied. "And though I can't say that I have ever laid myself out to make a study of the dear, delightful creatures, yet I am one of those peculiar men who generally manage to see everything that is going on, without having to bother myself much about it."

"You are a natural student and can not help making a careful study of all that comes in your way."

"Well, yes, I suppose that is about the idea."

"You are correct in your supposition that Miss Arabella was not disposed to credit the woman's tale," the old lawyer affirmed.

"Nay more, she even went to the length of declaring that the story was all a lie, and that the girl was no more Jack Vanderhoven's widow than she was."

"Women who are a little inclined to be strong-minded, of the type which I judge Miss Arabella to be from your description, are very likely to make extremely forcible declarations."

"I did not attempt to argue the matter, for as the case stood I considered it would be merely a waste of time, so I contented myself by saying that the question could only be settled by sending a trusty messenger to the mining-camp where the marriage had taken place with orders to spare no expense to discover the truth."

"Yes, under the circumstances that was the only course open to you."

"By opposing the claim of the alleged widow it would be an easy matter to gain time so that the examination could be made, and then too the law required that the death of Jack Vanderhoven should be proven in a conclusive manner, or else his estate could not be settled."

"Of course, it would not be exactly the square thing for the law to step in and distribute the property of a man unless it was certain that he had departed from this vale of tears."

"Exactly!" the old gentleman declared. "As executor of the estate I demanded proof of the heir's death and the surrogate appointed a commission consisting of two young lawyers, who had been chums of Jack Vanderhoven at college, and therefore being well-acquainted with him were perfectly competent to identify his remains, to proceed to Hardtack City and ascertain if he really had died there."

"And that sort of thing takes time," the sport observed.

"Oh, yes, it is an old adage that great bodies move slowly, and a commission of that kind does not get under way in a hurry."

"In fact, the two will not leave New York for a week yet, being detained by professional engagements."

"After I had arranged this matter, when I explained it to Miss Arabella and said the next move was to dispatch a trusty agent, who would have time before the commission arrived on the ground to look into the merits of the case—my idea being, you understand, for the man to quietly get at all the facts in the case without allowing anybody to comprehend what he was driving at."

"Yes, I see," the Fresh remarked with an approving nod. "If there was a game—a conspiracy so to speak—your man would stand a chance of getting at the truth, for the parties who are working the thing would be only prepared for the visit of the commission and therefore arrange all their plans to hoodwink them."

"Certainly! Now when I suggested this scheme to Miss Arabella she was pleased, and took pains to compliment me on my shrewdness."

"The idea was an excellent one—not a doubt of it!" Blake declared.

"But now comes the odd part of the affair," the old gentleman continued.

"After she had hesitated over the matter for a few moments, one of those eccentric ideas, which are decidedly more common to the female sex than to the masculine gender, came into her

mind; why could not we two come to Hardtack City and examine into the matter?"

"That is a woman, all over!"

"She quoted the old saying that one who waits upon himself is well-served."

"There is a deal of truth in that," the sport declared with a knowing shake of his head.

"I interposed the objection that neither one of us could hope to play the detective successfully."

"That is true, too."

"But she was ready for the objection, and replied immediately that she had no idea that we could do anything of the kind; we could hire a man in the mining-camp to attend to that part of the business, and she felt convinced that we would stand a much better chance of learning the truth about the matter if we could be right on the ground so the agent could consult with us than if we remained in New York."

"The lady was certainly right about that."

"Yes, I was obliged to make that admission, and though I did not particularly relish the trip, yet when I saw that her heart was set on it I agreed to go."

"Of course, I understood that as far as a fee went I was at liberty to name my own price, but I must say that if I could have foreseen this Indian business I would not have come on any account."

"I don't think there is any particular danger, although it is disagreeable to have to run the risk," Blake observed.

"Yes, your arguments seem to be sound in regard to that, still it is very unpleasant."

"But to come back to the main idea, the thought has come to me that you would be a good man to undertake this detective business, if you care to go into it."

"The price for the service will be a liberal one," the old gentleman continued. "Miss Vanderhoven is not the woman to haggle about money if she is well served."

"What do you say?"

"Well, I don't see any reason at present why I should not take the job," the sport replied.

"I don't profess to be a trained and skillful detective, you understand?" he added.

"Oh, yes, yes! I comprehend that!" the old lawyer exclaimed. "I did not expect to find a regular professional slot-bound in this out-of-the-way corner of the world, but I have no doubt you will be a success in the role."

"In fact it is my opinion that you stand a much better chance to accomplish important results than a regular eastern detective, for you are well-posted in regard to men and matters in this wild region while he would labor under the disadvantage of ignorance."

"All right, it is a bargain! If we get out of this scrape all serene, and I reckon there isn't much danger but what we will, I will go into the affair, and do what I can to find out all about Jack Vanderhoven; if there is a game I ought to be able to discover it!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE INDIAN PRINCESS.

THE shades of night had descended upon the Indian village.

It was early in the spring, and with the approach of the gloom came a chilly air which offered the red-skins an excuse to keep up the fires by means of which their evening meal had been cooked, and around these fires the people of the encampment were gathered, all busily engaged in discussing what the future would bring forth.

The Indians were divided into two parties; the majority of the young men—the wild, reckless fellows, who were eager for a chance to distinguish themselves upon the war-path—looked upon the Laughing Horse as being one of the greatest men that the Sioux nation had ever known, and they felt quite certain that if war did come, as seemed almost certain, the red chiefs would give the hated pale-faces such a drubbing that the white men would not be in a hurry to again invade the Indian Territory.

But the old experienced men—the sages of the tribe—shook their heads as they listened to the boastful utterances of the young men.

They had tested the powers of the white braves to their sorrow and understood how small was the chance of success attending the efforts of the red-man when he gave battle to the pale-face.

So strong though did the war-current run that the old men saw that their words were only wasted when they counseled peace, and so, with gloomy brows, they held their tongues and listened to the vaporings of the young braves.

At the upper end of the village, remote from all the wigwams, with the exception of the one in which the two white men were confined, was the tepee of the old medicine-man.

Nish-ma-wah sat within the lodge, attending to a small fire, over which was an iron pot, containing herbs that the old man was rendering into medicine in the Indian fashion.

The rays of light which came from the fire lighted up the interior of the lodge so that all objects were distinctly visible.

With a rudely-shaped wooden spoon the old

man stirred the decoction, which filled the wigwam with a most peculiar odor.

That the thoughts of the old medicine-man were not pleasant was apparent from the scowl which sat upon his brow, and the vigorous way he stirred the contents of the kettle every now and then, just as though he bore the innocent simples a deadly grudge.

The meditations of the medicine-man were disturbed by the abrupt appearance of a young Indian girl, who, with almost noiseless steps, lifted up the wolf-hide which masked the door of the tepee and glided into the wigwam.

The new-comer was tall and straight, splendidly proportioned, and so light in color that if she had not been dressed in the Indian garb it would have taken a very good judge of nationalities indeed to have decided that she was a daughter of the red lords of the wilderness.

From her proud and baughty carriage, as well as the unusual richness of her attire, it was plain she was no common Indian maid.

The Speckled Pigeon she was called, and she was known far and near as the White Squaw of the Mussellsbell Sioux.

The daughter of the dead chieftain, Tall Thunder, sister to the Laughing Horse, she occupied a position far in advance of all the other women of the tribe.

And that she was entitled to the situation, not only because she was the daughter of the great Sioux chieftain, but on account of her being truly a remarkable girl was apparent from her noble appearance and the brainy look which she possessed.

That she was gifted with unusual courage, and resolution was plainly shown by the expression upon her mobile features.

After entering the wigwam she halted for a moment and looked at the old medicine-man, who, beyond lifting his eyebrows in a peculiar way when she entered, gave no sign that he noticed her presence; then the girl took a seat upon a pile of robes to the left of the old man.

"Is not my father well?" she asked, speaking in the Indian tongue, her voice rich and melodious.

"Well in body but sick at heart," the old medicine-man answered.

"All has not gone as the Ground Hog wished?"

"No; the Laughing Horse is like an unruly colt, and when I attempt to put a bridle upon him he evades my hand," the old Indian replied, with a solemn shake of his massive head.

"This white man is not the one?"

"He is the second—not the first."

"How comes it, then, my father, that the first man was not captured?"

"Because he was the Red Rattlesnake, and when the Laughing Horse saw him from his covert among the trees he cried out that he could not be the one that the Great Spirit spoke of, for he was not a white man, but a white man's devil!"

The proud lip of the girl curled in contempt.

"My brother has more of the wisdom of the fox in him than I gave him credit for possessing!" she exclaimed.

"But were the other warriors satisfied with this speech? Did they consider the excuse a good one?"

"Oh, yes; there is not one of them who is willing to face the Red Rattlesnake—no, nor ten of them, even, were he alone and weaponless!"

"And did my father, when he went into the spirit-land in his dreams, see that the Red Rattlesnake would be the first to come along the trail?"

There was a sly twinkle in the eyes of the red-man as he replied, although he nodded his head in a grave and solemn way.

"In the spirit-land it is dark and shadowy and the red prophet who gropes his way through the gloom cannot see clearly, yet the figure which I saw there resembled the Red Rattlesnake more than any one whom I ever saw."

"It was not the figure of this white man who has been captured?" the Indian girl asked, a slight frown clouding her handsome face.

"No, no, taller—an older man."

"And so the Laughing Horse allowed the Red Rattlesnake to go by and waited for the second man," the girl remarked in a reflective way.

"Yes, and the warriors believe that he was right, too," the old medicine-man declared in a way which showed he was annoyed by the circumstance.

The maiden gave utterance to a low laugh which was full of scorn.

"Ah, my father, you are not as cunning as you think, for in this affair you must admit that the boasting young chief has got the best of you."

"Yes, it is true," and the old medicine-man shook his head in a mournful way.

The evil spirit must have been at the elbow of the Laughing Horse, or else he never would have been able to avoid meeting the Red Rattlesnake."

"It is a pity!" the girl declared. "For if he had not shrunk from the encounter, there is little doubt in regard to the result."

"No, for it is as he says, the Red Rattlesnake is the white man's devil, and the Indian brave who crosses his path must prepare to chant his death-song."

"And what think you of this white prisoner?" the girl questioned. "Will he not answer in place of the Red Rattlesnake?"

The old man shook his head.

"There is but one Red Rattlesnake in the land of the setting sun; no white brave that ever stepped foot in the country of the Sioux nation is as great as he!" the old medicine-man responded in a tone which showed plainly that he had the utmost faith in his statement.

"It may be true, yet I think this strange white chief is a good man," the girl remarked in a thoughtful way.

The other shook his head.

"Did he not offer to fight the red warriors, although completely surrounded?"

"He is a stranger, and did not know how great was the danger."

"You should be a better judge than I, yet I believe you to be wrong," the girl declared.

"He is not a mountain-man like the Red Rattlesnake, and what can he know of prairie war?"

"If I judge aright, he is as brave as a lion, and will fight to the death."

"I must see him!" she cried, abruptly. "There is a vacant wigwam next to the one that the two white men are in."

"I will go there, and you bring him!" And then the Indian princess strode away with the air of one who knew that her commands must be obeyed.

CHAPTER IX.

THE STORY OF THE WHITE SQUAW.

THE red warriors had not taken the trouble to bind their prisoners, for as the wigwams in which they were confined were surrounded by a line of sentinels, who kept vigilant watch both by day and night, an escape was almost impossible.

The Indian chief known as Spotted Calf had charge of the prison guard, and as he was the nephew of the old medicine-man, Nish-ma-wah, that worthy had no difficulty in arranging the transfer of the prisoner.

Blake followed the old Indian without a word when he was told to come, but as the two came within a yard of the wigwam wherein the Speckled Pigeon waited, Nish-ma-wah halted, laid his hand upon the arm of the prisoner, and said in an impressive tone:

"You are about to enter the presence of the Speckled Pigeon, the White Squaw of the Musselshell Sioux. She is the daughter of the greatest chief that the tribe has ever known, Tall Thunder, who is also the father of the Laughing Horse, the present chief of the Musselshell Sioux."

"Give wise heed to what the White Squaw says, for she is wiser than any red brave in the tribe, and her words have weight."

"Oh, yes, I will be careful to pay attention, particularly as I have a high respect for the wisdom of the female sex," the sport replied.

The brows of the old Indian knitted, and a scowl came over his dark face.

For though the sharp spoke in a serious way, yet there was something in the tone which jarred on the sensitive ear of the medicine-man.

"The white man must not make any mistake!" he declared.

"The Speckled Pigeon is no common squaw, and if you do not listen attentively to her words you will be sorry for it."

"Much obliged to you for the warning," Blake responded, in an easy, careless way, which was so natural to him.

"And now, respected red brother, let me caution you not to make any mistake about me. I am not the kind of man to be frightened, particularly by words. Your White Squaw may be a very great creature, but I reckon I am not going to bow my head down in the dust before her if she is; I am not that kind of man because I am not built that way."

"The white chief mistakes my meaning," the old medicine-man declared.

"It was not my intention to attempt to frighten him," he added, with great dignity. "But I know that the white-skins are apt to think that the Indian women are but little better than beasts of burden, and I did not want my brother to make that mistake in regard to the White Squaw, for she has more brains than any man in the tribe."

"As I am a stranger in this part of the country, I of course know nothing about your people, and I can assure you, too, that I am not anxious to know anything about them," Blake affirmed. "It was not of my own free will that I came here, and if I had my way I would speedily depart."

"I haven't any idea what your White Squaw wants of me, but you can rest assured I will pay careful attention to what she has to say."

"More cannot be asked," the old medicine-man declared, in a sententious way, and then he pushed aside the skin door of the wigwam that the sport could enter, remaining on the outside himself.

Blake advanced without hesitation, and found himself in a medium-sized tepee, in the center of which blazed a small fire, which afforded sufficient light to enable the sharp to see plainly.

The Indian girl was seated on a couch of

skins, in the center of the wigwam, just back of the fire, and she motioned the sport to take a seat by her side.

Blake was a keen observer, and the life of adventure which he had led for years had made him a good judge of humanity, and so he was able to discern, after getting a good look at the girl's face, that the old medicine-man had not made any mistake when he declared that she was far superior to the common run of Indian women.

"Or white ones, too, for that matter," was the Fresh's thought, after he had seen what the girl was like.

After the sport seated himself by the side of the Indian maiden, on the couch of skins, she spoke.

"We must converse in a low tone, or else there is danger of our words being overheard," she remarked, in a voice but little above a whisper.

"Yes, I can understand that, for a wigwam is not like a house."

"Although I am a stranger to you and come of a race which has ever had reason to be hostile to all men whose skins are white, yet you will not find me to be your enemy," the girl declared.

"I am glad indeed to know that, for it is my opinion that I am in a pretty tight place here, and it is always well to have friends at court, anyway."

"You will find that I will do all I can for you," the girl observed.

"Much obliged, and you can rest assured I will return the favor if it is ever in my power so to do!" the sport replied.

"Is this your first visit to this section?"

"Yes, I was on my way to Hardtack City when your warriors captured me."

"But you do not look like a miner," the girl remarked, glancing at the sharp's costume.

"No, mining isn't exactly in my line. I am a speculator—a sport—a gambler, to come right down to the plain, honest truth."

A shade passed over the face of the Indian girl and she shook her head.

"I suspected from the fashion of your dress that you were something of the kind, and I am sorry that my suspicions are correct."

"It seems to me that a man like yourself could find something better to do," she added.

"Yes, I am aware that I might, but circumstances alter cases," the sport replied. "What a man might do and what he does do are two entirely different things."

"Now take yourself, for instance: you speak as good English as I do, and as far as your color goes I have known plenty of white women who were fully as dark in complexion as you are; really now, without any desire to flatter you, I must say that you appear to be as lady-like and well-bred as any girl I ever encountered, and yet what are you?—the White Squaw of a tribe of savages, the associate of men the majority of whom have no higher ambition in life than to get drunk on cheap whisky and scalp defenseless white men."

"No, no; that statement is not correct!" the girl replied.

"The Indians are not all bad and will compare favorably with the white men on the frontier with whom they are brought in contact."

"You must take the fact in consideration, too, that the whites have advantages which the red-men lack. That these are more merciless and savage in time of war is true, but you must bear in mind that the red-men but follow in the footsteps of their ancestors, and when it comes their turn to suffer they do so unflinchingly."

"Yes, undoubtedly there is a great deal of truth in what you say," Blake observed, reflectively.

"As the red-men are brought up to think that sort of thing is correct, I suppose it is only natural they should believe it to be all right, and it would be hard work to make them think otherwise. An illustration of the old saying that it is hard work to teach old dogs new tricks."

"And in regard to myself it is not strange that I am radically different from the women of my race," the Indian girl remarked.

"I am the daughter of one of the greatest chiefs that the Sioux nation has ever known. Tall Thunder was not only a warrior but a statesman, and while he lived his branch of the tribe prospered, for he was too wise to permit his people to dare the white man's power."

"There is where he was sensible," the sport declared.

"An Indian war can have but one ending. The red chiefs may make it lively for the settlers for a while, but in the end the troops always whip the braves to a standstill."

"Yes, that is the truth, but it is so hard to make the young warriors comprehend it," the girl observed.

"The old braves who have been through such an experience seldom fail to comprehend that it is almost as impossible for the red-man to conquer the white-skins as for them to attempt to pluck the stars from the sky, but the young men

will not listen to reason. All they know of the white men is what they see in the little settlements on the borders of the Indian Territory—the white-skins are a mere handful, apparently, when compared to the red-men, and when one of the old chiefs, who has traveled through the land of the pale-faces, tells his story of the vast cities with countless lodges, and men so plentiful that they may be likened to the leaves of the forest or the grains of sand upon the river's edge, the young men either straightway brand him as a liar, or else declare the white medicine-men were cunning enough to put a spell upon the speaker so that his eyes were blinded and his judgment misled."

"Yes, I have heard this story before, and it is but a repetition of an ancient one," the sport remarked.

"Ever since the world was young, men have either been ready to believe the most outrageous fables, or else quick to scoff at the seekers after knowledge when they told a plain, straight forward tale."

"Yes, it is not alone the untutored red-men who 'strain at gnats and swallow camels,'" the Speckled Pigeon observed.

"But to return to myself: I am the child of Tall Thunder by a white wife, a settler's daughter who fell in love with the Sioux chieftain and deserted her people to dwell in his lodge; I do not think, either, that she ever regretted the step, for my father treated her like a queen."

"She died when I was ten years old, and my father sorrowed for her as sincerely as ever a white man mourned for his lost partner."

"Before my mother's death my father had promised her that I should be sent among the whites to be educated, and he kept his word."

"I went to the Indian school at Carlisle, in Pennsylvania, where I remained for eight years before I returned to my people."

"I should think that after so long a sojourn among the civilized people of the East you would have been reluctant to return to the primitive village of the red-men."

"I might say the same thing of yourself," the girl retorted, quickly.

"You are a well-educated man, and used to good society; I can see that plainly enough; what then are you doing out here in this wilderness?"

The Fresh laughed, for he saw that he was fairly caught.

"It is the original barbarian *cropping* out from beneath the veneer of civilization, I presume," he answered.

"Yes, that is the truth, I think," the Indian girl said, slowly. "In my own case I am certain that it is so. It is hard work to civilize one within whose veins runs the red life-current of the old Sioux nation."

"There is something in the wild companionship of nature which appeals powerfully to the children who are reared in the wilderness, and though they may for a time be content to dwell in the haunts of civilized men, yet, sooner or later, the desire to return again to the vast solitudes, where nature reigns supreme, becomes too great for them to resist, so they yield to the temptation and return to their original barbarism."

"I reckon you have ciphered the thing out about right," Blake remarked.

"In my case, though, I forsake the East for the West—the city for the mining camp, because I am a natural born rover and cannot be content to lead a quiet life. I crave change and excitement and I do not suppose I will ever be content to settle down until I receive my marching orders for another world."

The sharp was honest enough to admit the truth.

"Yes, I understand, and then in my case, too, I had another motive for returning to my tribe," the Indian girl remarked.

"Blood is thicker than water, and as I had advantages which were denied to the rest of my people, I felt that it was my duty to return and do all I could to improve their condition."

"That was right!" the sport declared, with an approving nod.

"I considered that it was so. If white women think that they are doing a service to humanity by going as missionaries to civilize the red-men, how much stronger, then, should be the inducement for an Indian woman, capable of doing the work, to undertake the task."

"Very true, and you acted quite right in abandoning civilization to take up your residence in the wilderness."

"While my father lived all went well, and the condition of the Sioux was steadily improving; then came his sudden death, only a few months ago, and the rise of my half-brother, the Laughing Horse, to the chieftainship."

"Yes, I am acquainted with the particulars of how he came to be chief," and the sport described how he had encountered the old scout, Red Rattlesnake, and detailed the conversation which ensued.

"The Laughing Horse was jealous of the influence which I had over the warriors, and from the time of his grasping the chieftainship he has done his best to interfere with my work; now I have, practically, been obliged to stop, and it will not take him long to undo all that I have done."

CHAPTER X.

THE MEDICINE-MAN'S TRICK.

"Ah, yes it is the old story!" Blake declared. "It is always a great deal easier to tear down than to build up."

"The Laughing Horse represents the war party of the tribe—the young bucks and the stubborn old bigots who cannot knock sense into their heads even by butting against a stone wall," the sport continued.

"Thanks to the information given me by the old scout, I understand the situation as well as though I had been living in this section all my life."

"The trouble began with the distribution of the Government goods by the Indian agent at the reservation," the Indian girl explained.

"The agent is no better than he should be, and if he has a chance to cheat the red-men, will undoubtedly improve it, but on this occasion there was very little cheating, but the Laughing Horse declared that there was and threatened the life of the agent."

"His courage was not great so he promptly fled to Fort Scott for protection, and this movement gave the Laughing Horse an opportunity to abandoned the reservation, under the pretext that the soldiers were coming, and the camp was pitched in this out-of-the-way spot."

"Then the colonel in command of Fort Scott was cute enough to catch two of the Laughing Horse's favorite braves in the act of stealing horses from his corral, and he promptly locked them up; this gave my half-brother another chance to denounce the white men, and this time he got the braves so excited that they were all ready to go on the war-path, in spite of all that I and the few old warriors who did not believe in fighting, could do to prevent," and the girl shook her head with a sad air.

"Ah, yes, I understand how that sort of thing is worked!" Blake declared. "The red braves are like the white men in allowing themselves to be carried away by the impulse of the moment; rushing things through with a hurrah, as the saying is."

"It was in vain that I attempted to stem the tide; the popular sentiment in favor of war was too strong, and even the counsels of the old medicine-man, Nish-ma-wah, were disregarded because he spoke in favor of peace."

"That shows how strongly the tide was running."

"Nish-ma-wah is my father's brother, and, like him, is a man of great natural powers," the Speckled Pigeon explained.

"When he found that the braves were not disposed to pay heed to his words he cunningly pretended to allow himself to be convinced that they were in the right in believing war to be desirable."

"I understand the game," the Fresh observed. "Finding that he could not stem the tide he concluded to go with it in hopes that he might be able to direct the current."

"Yes, that was his idea," the girl admitted. "The old man has a great reputation as a prophet, and I do not wonder at it, for he certainly is strangely gifted."

"At times he goes into a trance, and while in that state is able to tell many things which are known only to the person who desires information."

"I comprehend; it is the clairvoyance business," the sport remarked. "I know all about it, for I was well acquainted with an old fellow who traveled around telling fortunes by means of clairvoyance."

"I found him 'strapped,' as the boys say, in a little frontier town. He was down on his back with a bad attack of chills and fever, and as I happened to have plenty of money at the time I saw the old fellow through, for he was an honest old chap, although clean gone on his clairvoyance business."

"I have a sort of turn for investigation, even though the matter may be one that does not concern me in the least, so I looked into clairvoyance, and I speedily made up my mind that as far as foretelling the future went the thing was an out and out fraud."

The professor, as he called himself, had the gift of being able, when he went into his trance to tell me what I knew; that is, in some mysterious way he was able to read the thoughts that were in my brain, and could even recall things that I had almost forgotten, but that was the extent of his power, and as far as fortune-telling went I would back myself with a pack of cards to tell fortunes in the good old-fashioned way for any amount against him."

"I do not know much about the matter," the Italian girl remarked. "But I should not be surprised if you were right."

"Oh, yes, I am positive that I am!" the sharp replied. "The professor had the utmost faith that he could do exactly what he said he could accomplish. The man was no fraud knowingly, only a little weak in the upper story in regard to his system, but I tried him a dozen different ways, and he made a flat failure in not only predicting the future, but in revealing what had taken place when it came to things of which it was not possible for either one of us to have any knowledge."

"Your medicine-man may be more highly gifted than my professor, but I doubt it."

"Well, he certainly does possess strange powers, and the people of the tribe regard him with a great deal of awe," the Speckled Pigeon observed.

"He took advantage of this fact to make an attempt to stop the red-men from making war upon the whites, for he believed with me that if a war began it would only end with the total destruction of the Musselshell Sioux."

"His head was level there, in my opinion!" the sharp declared.

"It is customary, you know, for the Indians before entering upon any important enterprise, to consult the medicine-man."

"Yes, I am aware of that fact, and they hope through him to get the Great Spirit to look with a favorable eye upon the undertaking."

"That is correct, and when Nish-ma-wah shut himself up in his wigwam, and went through the mystic services necessary to the supernatural process, all the tribe waited with wondering awe for the revelation."

"And it is a remarkable fact that the Great Spirit is always kind enough to come when the medicine-man summons him," the sport remarked, with a sarcastic smile.

"Another odd thing, too, is that all these prophets, from the earliest ages, have always taken care to seclude themselves when they intended to commune with the powers of the other world—secrecy, and, generally, darkness, are necessary to the successful carrying out of the programme."

"To the mind of an unprejudiced man—one who desires to examine the matter in the clear light of reason, it would appear as though these communers with supernatural personages had made up their minds to have the business so arranged that no one would be able to tell whether they did really receive the revelations or not."

"You must take the whole thing on trust, you know," the sharp continued in his terse decisive way. "You must believe what they say because they tell you it is so, going on the idea, 'I am the biggest wonder-worker that the world ever saw! When I speak let no dog bark!'"

The white squaw laughed.

"In this case you are certainly right in your conjecture that the medicine-man was much more responsible for the communication, which he said he had received from the other world, than the Great Spirit who was supposed to have sent it."

"What was the communication?"

"That the result of the war would depend upon the first fight which would take place between the red-men and the whites," the girl replied.

"If a red warrior succeeded in overcoming a white-skin in a fair and open struggle then the Sioux would surely succeed in driving the pale-faces from the Indian Territory, but if the white man conquered, then the war would end with the complete destruction of the Musselshell Sioux."

"Well, well, that was considerable of a prophecy," the sharp observed.

"Upon the prowess of two men—champions, so to speak, the issue was to depend."

"Yes, and as the Laughing Horse had set himself up to be the greatest warrior in the tribe, it was only natural that all should think that he was the man who ought to do battle for the red-men."

"And I don't doubt he was eager to improve the opportunity."

"He was, and he besought Nish-ma-wah to again consult the Great Spirit in order to see if his assumption of the role of champion would be looked upon favorably."

"I have no doubt the old medicine, after going through his mystic performances, responded that it was what the Great Spirit desired above all things," the sport remarked in a cynical way.

"Yes, you are right, that was the answer, and with it came the information that the Laughing Horse must take part with his warriors on the Musselshell River trail, and the first man that came along the trail as the sun sunk to rest behind the western hills would be the one whom the red chief must encounter."

"Well, I suppose I am the man then as I was the first one captured," the sharp remarked in a thoughtful way. "But, really, I don't see the object of this communication, for, of course, I take it for granted that the old medicine-man had some deep motive in representing that the Great Spirit had made this announcement."

"Yes, that was my thought when I heard of it, for I knew Nish-ma-wah too well not to understand that he would not have delivered such a message without good reason."

"I did not question him, for I knew that not even to me would he admit there was any trickery in his supernatural communications, but I soon learned his plan."

"He had discovered that Red Rattlesnake was to leave Fort Scott, journeying to the eastward, and he timed his announcement so that the Laughing Horse would encounter the old scout."

"But he missed him and got me instead."

"No, he did not miss him, but with a cunning

for which even I, who know him so well, did not give him credit for possessing, he evaded meeting the Red Rattlesnake by declaring that the Great Spirit had said he must encounter the first white man, and the old scout was not a man but a devil."

"Very ingeniously put indeed!" Blake declared with an approving nod. "And it shows that your half-brother has a big head. He did not want to tackle the old scout, who has a great reputation as a fighting man, and yet could not afford to back right out and give that as a reason."

"Yes, that is true, although, really, I don't believe there is a single warrior in the tribe who would be willing to face the Red Rattlesnake if he could possibly avoid the encounter."

"Well, the red buck certainly showed a great deal of shrewdness in the way which he managed to get out of the scrape. He let the Red Rattlesnake go on in peace and gobbled me."

"Yes, and you will have to meet him."

"Quite an honor, now!" the Fresh declared, smilingly. "Just consider! The whole issue of this Indian question depends upon me. If I can lay out the Laughing Horse peace comes instead of war."

CHAPTER XI.

A REVELATION

THE speech was accompanied by a laugh just as if the sport did not consider the matter to be a particularly serious one, and the Indian girl shook her head in a slow and serious way.

"I fear you do not comprehend the gravity of the situation," she observed.

"Oh, yes, I do," Blake replied, quickly. "This Indian buck is a big chief, and all that sort of thing, and I have no doubt he calculates to eat me without salt."

"He is a good warrior, and when his right to the chieftainship of the tribe was disputed, he easily defeated the men who opposed him."

"Well, he may be able to get away with me, but I doubt it!" the Fresh declared, in his airy, confident way.

"You are not as muscular as the chief," the Speckled Pigeon observed, with a doubtful glance at the well-proportioned figure of the sport.

Blake was so well put together as to present an extremely deceptive appearance, not appearing to be as big by forty or fifty pounds as he really was.

"You are not an expert, and so are not a good judge in regard to that sort of thing," the sport replied.

"It is an extremely hard matter for an inexperienced person to form a correct opinion in regard to a matter of this kind," he explained.

"The chief is a brawny, big fellow, with plenty of bone, but I doubt if he possesses muscle in proportion; he has good arms and chest, but very bad legs, not at all what they should be to correspond with the rest of his body, and then, he is decidedly slow and extremely clumsy."

"In fine, to sum him all up, no good judge of men in search of a champion athlete, a man fit to be a world-beater, would ever make the mistake of selecting him."

The confident manner in which the sport spoke encouraged the girl, and her face brightened.

"Of course, I am no judge in regard to such a matter, but, really, it does not seem as if you stood a chance to conquer the chief," she remarked.

"Well, I do not feel much anxiety in regard to pulling through," the Fresh declared.

"In fact, I feel convinced that I will not come out of the little end of the horn, but whether the struggle will be long or short will depend a great deal upon the weapons used."

"Are you a good shot?"

"Yes, with either rifle or revolver, and the distance does not matter a particle to me so long as it is within range of the gun."

"The chief is a good shot, but nothing extra."

"Well, I am, luckily! And I am not indulging in any boasting when I say that though I have met my equals in skill in that line yet I never met a man who could beat me."

"The chances then are in your favor if the chief chooses either the rifle or the revolver, but I have an idea that he will not select either weapon," the girl remarked.

"I had just as lief meet him with the knife!" the Fresh declared.

"I flatter myself that I can handle a bowie as well as the man who originally got up the weapon, and as I am about twice as quick on my legs as the Laughing Horse it will be a miracle if I do not succeed in giving him more knife-play than will be agreeable to his red lordship."

"I do not think he will choose knives either," said the Speckled Pigeon.

A look of surprise appeared on the face of the sport.

"What then—Indian war-clubs, or tomahawks?" he asked.

"Those are rather outlandish weapons, and though I can handle the hatchet pretty well, yet if there is any particular science in wielding a

war-club, and he is an expert in that line, I am afraid I shall have to admit that he has an advantage."

"Few of the young braves bother themselves to become skillful in the use of the war-club or tomahawk," the Indian girl replied. "Those are the weapons of the past, and the warrior of to-day relies upon fire-arms, although the knife and tomahawk are still used when it comes to a hand-to-hand struggle."

"What weapon will he choose then?" asked the Fresh, decidedly puzzled.

"Those which nature gave him," was the reply.

"You don't mean to say that he will decide to fight with fists?" Blake exclaimed.

"From what he said to one of the warriors, who told his words to me, I do not think there is a doubt but what he will decide to fight with fists."

"Well, I am amazed!" the sport declared. "Though now that I come to think of it, I remember the old scout told me that while he had been hanging around the saloons of the camp, he had learned to box after the white men's fashion."

"Yes, it is true, and he fancies that he will have an easy task to conquer you, for he thinks from the style of your dress that you are not a Westerner, and therefore will not be able to stand against him."

"Ah, yes, I see," the sport remarked, with a sarcastic smile.

"He has made the mistake that almost all ignorant men make of judging a man by his harness."

"His idea of a fighter is, no doubt, a big fellow in a red shirt, with fists like small legs of mutton, one of the 'I can lift a ton' style, half boss and half alligator, a man who goes around proclaiming that he is the biggest kind of a chief; the bully of the frontier camp, in short."

"Yes, that is the kind of man whom he would be apt to consider dangerous."

"Before he gets through with me he may have reason to change his opinion materially," the Fresh remarked, with a grim smile.

"From what the chief said, I know that he is looking forward to the encounter with a great deal of eagerness."

"Oh, he is, eh?" and a peculiar light shone in the keen eyes of the Fresh—the light which always played in his orbs when he was on mischief bent.

"Yes, he is so confident that he will be able to beat you with perfect ease, that it is his intention to play with you as a cat plays with a mouse."

"Hang the red scoundrel's impudence!" the sharp exclaimed. "Going to make a plaything out of me, is he?"

"Such is his intention. He intends to treat you as the red-men sometimes treat a prisoner when he is put to the torture; the tribe enjoy the sufferings of the victim before death comes to relieve the unfortunate from his misery."

"Ah, yes; I understand," and the peculiar light in the eyes of the sport grew stronger and stronger.

"He is so confident that I will not be able to do anything against him that he intends to hammer me at his leisure—make a laughing-stock of me, in fact, for the amusement of the gaping lookers-on."

"Yes, he has boasted that such is his intention," the Indian girl replied.

"Oh, he has?"

"So one of the chiefs told me."

"And I don't suppose that your informant had any doubt but what the Laughing Horse could carry out this programme all right?" the sport asked in an extremely sarcastic way.

"Oh, no; no one in the village thinks that you stand any chance."

"And when the fight takes place, I have no doubt that everybody in the encampment will be present, all struggling to get a place at the front so that they may have a good view of the white man's sufferings."

"Yes, undoubtedly."

"What a disappointment it will be to these children of nature if the white man should happen to succeed in pounding their red buck within an inch of his life!" the sport exclaimed.

"Their disgust will be great."

"Well, you are safe in betting everything that you have, or ever expect to have, that a performance of that kind is just what will take place, if this red chief is ever unwise enough to stand up against me."

"The contest will take place to-morrow."

"That is good—the sooner the better!" the Fresh declared, rubbing his hands together in a way indicative of great satisfaction.

"And one thing you can rely upon," the sport continued. "Yes, you can count upon it about as certainly as you can count upon anything in this uncertain world, and that is, if peace or war depend upon the result of this contest, it will be peace, for if I don't give this Laughing Horse the most unmerciful hammering that ever mortal got, it will be because I don't know anything at all about the manly art of self-defense."

"I am so glad to learn this, for my heart was sore when I thought that my people were doomed to ruin," the girl replied.

"Keep your own counsel and say not a word to any one of this disclosure."

Then she signaled and the sport was taken away.

When Blake returned to his former quarters the old lawyer was very anxious to learn what had taken place, but the sport merely said he had been put through a little cross-examination, which did not amount to anything.

But when the old gentleman nervously asked if the sport thought there was any chance of their escaping with their lives from the Indians, Blake replied in a decided manner that he did not think there was a doubt about their getting away all right, a declaration which the old lawyer affirmed took a great weight from his mind.

After a brief conversation the two retired to rest.

The lawyer grumbled a great deal at the rude bed—all they had to sleep on was a couple of buffalo-robe—and protested that he did not believe he would be able to close his eyes at all.

The sport laughed at him.

"Why, this is all right," he declared. "When you have slept on the bare earth with nothing under you but the turf, with the vaulted sky for a coverlet, as many times I have, you will consider a buffalo-robe to be the height of luxury."

"Yes, but I do not intend to go through any experience of that kind!" Mr. De Witt exclaimed.

"I have had about all of this sort of thing that I want!" he continued. "And I can tell you that if I succeed in getting safely out of this scrape you will never catch me exposing myself to such a risk again. I have quite made up my mind about that!"

"I am going back to New York just as soon as I have settled this little business at Hardtack City, and if any man ever catches me in the wilderness of the wild West again I will give him leave to take my head for a football!"

Blake could not forbear laughing at the old lawyer's emphatic words, but he was glad to be able to encourage the old gentleman.

It was a good hour before Mr. De Witt got asleep, but within ten minutes from the time he stretched himself upon the buffalo-robe the sport was in the land of dreams, and he slept as peacefully as though there was no care upon his mind, no thoughts of the coming encounter on the morrow disturbed his slumbers; the brawny red chief was not in his dreams.

CHAPTER XII.

THE OFFER.

THE captives awoke early in the morning and the old lawyer was in an extremely bad humor.

"This is perfectly awful!" he declared with a deep groan. "A week or so of this sort of thing will be the death of me, I know; I never will be able to stand it."

"Don't be discouraged," Blake counseled.

"You have no idea of what you can stand until you have been through some tough experiences. Humans are capable of enduring a great deal more suffering than the individual who is going through the operation is willing to believe."

"If this was not the truth, explorers and pioneers would not be able to accomplish much."

"Yes, yes, I suppose that a man can stand a great deal before breaking down, but, really, I would be willing to give about all I am worth if I was safe out of this terrible predicament," the old lawyer responded with a deep sigh.

"Oh, you will get out, all right!" the sport declared in the most confident manner.

"Don't worry about the matter—take things easy; what can't be cured must be endured. There is a heap of good, sound, old philosophy in that saying, as you must admit if you will take the trouble to examine into the matter carefully."

"Yes, I suppose so," the old gentleman remarked in a rueful way.

"But the trouble is, you see, I can't regard this affair with the indifference which you manifest; I cannot take things easy, as you counsel. I am dreadfully worried, and I don't believe that it will be possible for me to have a moment's peace while I am in this frightful place."

"Of course, all men are not constituted alike," the Fresh observed reflectively.

"There is no use of our attempting to get away from the fact that we are in a deuce of a scrape," he continued.

"Still, it is my opinion that it is not as bad as it might be. We are held as hostages, you know."

"Yes, but if the commander of the fort puts the Indians to death we will surely be executed," the old gentleman urged.

"Very true! that is what this red chieftain threatens, and it is very possible that the copper-colored buck would be as good as his word in the event of the red horse-thieves being executed, but you must remember that there isn't any danger of such a thing taking place."

"If the commander of the post—Colonel Poindexter I believe is the name of the officer—is one of the old style of military men, who goes in for backing up any move that he may make, regardless of the consequences, the

chances are that this idea of the Sioux seizing us for hostages will not have the slightest effect upon him as far as the horse-stealing braves are concerned."

"He will go right along in the discharge of his duty just the same as though the red-skins had not gobbled us; the horse-stealers will be tried, and if they are found guilty, punished according to law."

"Yes, of course, I understand all this, and that is what worries me!" the old gentleman declared. "If the red-skins are punished will not that exasperate our captors into some acts of retaliation?"

"It will be likely to have that effect, I suppose," the sport admitted.

"But if this Colonel Poindexter is good for anything he will be sure to put a flea in the ear of this Laughing Horse as soon as he hears of our capture."

"How so? I don't understand."

"Why, he will take pains to send a messenger and notify him that if he harms us in the least he will hold the tribe to a bloody responsibility."

The old lawyer shook his head in a melancholy way. It was plain that this explanation did not bring him any comfort.

"You don't take much stock in that, eh?" the sport asked, with a quiet smile.

"Indeed, I do not, for it seems to me as if these red-skins must have calculated upon the commander of the post acting in some such a way when they decided to capture us."

"Oh, no, you can't be sure of that!" Blake declared. "The most wily and sagacious of men often act upon the impulse of the moment and do the calculating afterwards; these red devils are regular hurrah boys sometimes, you see, and it seems to me to be very probable that they planned your capture without taking the trouble to reflect upon what the consequences might be; all they considered was that if they could get hold of some white-skins they could say to the colonel at Fort Scott, 'Be careful in regard to your treatment of our young men or else we will make it warm for our captives!'"

"Well, it certainly seems to me as if they made a very shrewd calculation," the old gentleman remarked in a nervous way.

"The colonel, of course, will be anxious to rescue us and so he will undoubtedly not do anything to put us in jeopardy."

"Well, that depends a good deal on what sort of a man the colonel is," the sport replied, slowly.

"If he is one of the old school as I said—a military martinet, a man who thinks everything ought to proceed by rule, he will be apt to become indignant that the savages should dare to try such a game on him, and, in his anger, dare them to do their worst, with the threat that he would hang every mother's son who had a hand in the matter."

"Ah, my goodness!" cried the old gentleman, considerably alarmed. "Such a message as that would be certain to provoke the Indians, and if they tortured, or put us to death the fact that the troops would take a bloody vengeance for the outrage wouldn't do us any good!"

"Not much!" the Fresh declared. "It would be on a par with locking the stable door after the horse was stolen."

The conversation was interrupted at this point by the entrance of the Indian guards with something for the captives to eat.

The fare was plain enough, flour cakes baked on hot stones and dried beef, but although the old lawyer made but a scanty meal the Fresh did full justice to the meager repast.

"You appear to eat with a relish," De Witt remarked. "While it is as much as I can do to force the stuff down my throat."

"The food is palatable enough," the sport replied. "It isn't first-class hotel fare, and then too I have been obliged to subsist on worse in my time, so I am not disposed to grumble; besides I have an idea that I may need all of my muscular energies pretty soon, and I must try and keep myself in as good condition as possible."

"Ah, yes, I see; you seem to have the happy disposition of trying to make the best of everything," the old gentleman remarked with a melancholy shake of the head.

"It is the right way to act, of course, but, unfortunately I am so constituted that I can not accept the reserves of fortune in such a philosophical way," he added.

"I know that it is very foolish of me not to be able to accustom myself to meet misfortune with a smile, but I cannot, and that is all there is to it."

Just as the captives finished their meal they were disturbed by the entrance of another visitor.

It was the old medicine-man, Nish-ma-wah, this time.

Blake anticipated what the old man had to say, thanks to the warning he had received from the White Squaw, and so he listened to the communication without betraying any astonishment, although the old lawyer was so amazed that he stared, open-mouthed, at the aged Indian.

To reduce the speech of the old medicine-man to a few words, he informed the sport that the great chief of the Musselshell Sioux,

the Laughing Horse had come to the conclusion from the fine weapons possessed by the white man that he must be a mighty warrior, and he was anxious to meet him in single fight.

Blake at once expressed his willingness to accommodate the great chief.

Then the old medicine-man explained that as the Laughing Horse did not desire to take the life of the white chief, as he wished to hold him for a hostage, so as to protect his young warriors at Fort Scott, he would fight him with fists after the white man's fashion, and the messenger took pains to explain that the Laughing Horse wanted the pale-face to understand that he knew all about fighting with fists as the white men fought and had easily vanquished some of the best of the white chiefs in the Hard-tack district.

"That is all right. It is a go, as far as I am concerned!" Blake exclaimed in the most cheerful manner.

"I am right up to the top of the heap in a fist fight," he added. "And if your big chief has the sand to stand up and take his gruel like a man I will hammer him so that his own mother won't know him!"

"If you conquer the chief you shall go free!" the old medicine-man declared.

"That is a bargain that I gladly jump at!" the sport declared.

"When is this little picnic to take place?" he inquired.

"As soon as you are ready," was the reply of the old Indian.

"Let her go, Gallagher, right away!" the Fresh exclaimed. "The quicker the better! I am all ready now, and the sooner we get at it the sooner will your big chief make the discovery that he has bit off more than he could chew when he challenged me to a fist fight."

"Let the white man prepare—soon I will summon him," Nish-ma-wah declared, turning upon his heel to leave the lodge.

"And, by the way, have the kindness to get my mule ready, and have my weapons handy, so I need not be delayed in my departure," Blake said.

A grim smile came over the stern face of the old medicine-man as he halted, with his hand on the skin-door of the wigwam.

"Is my white brother so certain that he can defeat the great chief of the Musselshell Sioux?"

"If I don't knock him out inside of half an hour after we once get at it you are welcome to boil me up into soup for your dogs!" the Fresh replied in the most confident manner.

"It is good!" exclaimed the old Indian. "If the white man can fight as well as he can talk then he is indeed a mighty warrior!" And with this declaration Nish-ma-wah departed.

"This is really a most extraordinary affair!" the old lawyer declared, full of amazement.

"Yes, it is what the boys would call a soft snap, not for the red-man, though!" the sport exclaimed with a laugh.

"But, surely, you are no match for this painted savage!" DeWitt cried.

"Oh, yes, I am! And before he has stood up before me for five minutes I will show him that there are some tricks in boxing which he never even dreamed of."

"You must get permission to see this fight! I don't know as you ever witnessed an affair of the kind?"

"Never!"

"Then there's a treat in store for you."

"You understand boxing then?"

"Oh, yes. I am a boxer from Boxerville!"

CHAPTER XIII. IN THE RING.

THE old lawyer shook his head in the gravest manner, for this affair was a complete puzzle to him.

"You don't understand it, eh?" questioned the Fresh, his face lit up by a confident smile.

"Indeed I do not; and I am completely amazed by the confidence which you seem to feel about the issue of this extremely peculiar contest."

"Of course, I am not an expert in such matters—far from it!" the old gentleman declared. "I have not seen any boxing since my school-boy days, and then, as I was always a quiet sort of chap, who did not go in for such things, I never got in any quarrels myself, although I have seen the other boys fight."

"But, really, it seems to me that you are laboring under a decided disadvantage in meeting this brawny savage, for he is a much bigger man than yourself."

"Oh, no!" the sport declared, decidedly. "That calculation shows that you are no judge of men."

"The red-skin looks bigger than he really is, for he is big-boned and clumsily put together, while I, being well-proportioned, do not appear so big as I really am."

"In fact, I am so confident that I have not made any mistake in this matter, that I would be willing to bet a trifle the chief does not weigh ten pounds more than I do, and ten pounds more or less when the men get to be middle-

weights, a hundred and fifty pounds or over, does not amount to much."

"Well, no, I suppose not, but, really, I am as innocent as a child about all such matters, yet, looking at the matter in the light of common sense, I should not think you were wrong in your statement."

"My usual weight is about a hundred and seventy pounds, but I can get down to a hundred and fifty and be well and strong," the sport declared.

"The probabilities are that I do not weigh over a hundred and sixty now, for I have been in the saddle for a week, and have undoubtedly worked off what little flesh I had to spare."

"A man like myself, you see, is almost always in condition, for I am temperate in all things, and being always on the go, taking regular exercise, never put on much fat, which is the worst enemy the athlete has to contend with, particularly the boxer."

"You are not aware of the fact, of course, as you don't know anything about boxing, but five minutes' exercise in that line will be apt to make the strongest man have 'bellows to mend,' as the saying is."

"I comprehend! The wind is affected?"

"Exactly! try to run for five minutes as hard as you can—and a good professional runner will cover a mile in that time, you know—and then see how you will feel."

"Bless my soul! I do not believe I would be able to speak—I would be utterly exhausted."

"Well, it is fully as hard work to dance around a man for five minutes, striking at him with all your might, and doing your best to keep him from landing on you as it is to do the running," the sport declared.

"In fact, I think I would rather take the running end," he added.

"Well, well, I sincerely hope that you will succeed in conquering this brawny chieftain," the old lawyer remarked.

"Unless some accident happens I will 'do' him to a certainty!" the sport affirmed in the most confident manner.

"But I don't understand how it is that you can be so confident about the matter," DeWitt observed with a puzzled air.

"You do not know anything about the man; how can you tell that he is not a terrible fighter?" the old gentleman questioned.

"The chances are a thousand to one that he will not be anything but a chopping-block for me!" the Fresh replied.

"You must consider that boxing is not only an art but it takes genius to become a great fighter. It is as much a gift as the power to become great in painting or music, or anything of the kind, where one man stands a head and shoulders above a thousand others, apparently as competent in every way."

"You can teach a pupil the rules for drawing, and the use of colors, but you cannot make an artist out of the learner if he hasn't got it in him, and it is just the same way with boxing; then too there must be not only actual genius, but the capability to stand hard knocks—the stamina to endure blows, calculated to almost kill an ordinary man," the sport explained.

The old lawyer had listened with the utmost attention, and his gaze expressed considerable amazement.

"Upon my word, you completely surprise me, Mr. Blake!" he asserted.

"I supposed from what I have read in the newspapers about such things that there was considerable science about these prize-fighting fellows, but I had the idea that if a man possessed sufficient muscle and strength it would not trouble him much to learn to be an expert prize-fighter, but I see I had the wrong idea."

"Yes, a man must possess certain gifts or else he's no good in the ring. Now I have not got remarkably large hands, but feel them."

The old lawyer did so.

"They are extremely hard," he remarked.

"Run your hand over my arms."

DeWitt complied with the request, and an expression of astonishment came from his lips.

"I never felt such solid flesh!" he declared.

"And your muscles feel like bundles of whips."

"Then, if you notice, my arms are rather long—really, they are out of proportion with the rest of my body, but it is one of those things that nobody notices, and it gives me what the boxers term an extremely long reach."

"I think I comprehend. By the lucky accident of being gifted by nature with long arms, you are able to hit your opponents without their being able to get at you?"

"Yes, that is correct. Now then, to sum the matter up, there is not much more than one man out of a hundred that really knows anything about boxing; not more than one out of a thousand who can be said to be gifted in that way, and so in this case the odds are fully a thousand to one that this big chief will not be a dangerous foe."

"When these miners indulge in a fist fight, they usually do more hugging and clawing than striking, and as that is the school in which this red-man has picked up his knowledge, it stands to reason that he can know but little of the true principles of boxing," the sport argued.

"I understand his game, I think," Blake continued.

"He is a big fellow and probably imagines that he is possessed of wonderful strength. He is burning with a desire to show his tribe now easy it is for him to get away with a white man."

"It would not do for him to kill me just now for he has an idea that Colonel Poinexter might get back at him through his young braves that the officer holds, so he devised this plan of fighting me with his fists."

"If he can whip a white man at his own game so much the greater his glory."

"Ah, yes, the savage has planned the matter with extreme shrewdness."

"Yes, but before he gets through with the affair I think he will arrive at the conclusion that he made the biggest kind of a mistake when he picked me out for a victim."

"I sincerely hope that events will shape themselves in that way!" the old lawyer declared in a fervent manner which went far to prove that the wish came straight from his heart.

"It is my intention, if I can do it—and I think I can—to give this red ruffian as complete a thrashing as mortal man ever received," the sport affirmed.

"As a rule I am not a particularly vindictive fellow, and I seldom go in to punish my adversary any more than is absolutely necessary to convince him that he made a mistake when he entered the list against me, but on this occasion, under the circumstances of the case I think I am justified in hammering this red rascal to the best of my ability, and you can rest assured I will not spare him in the least."

"Certainly not!" the old lawyer exclaimed in a very decided way. "The honor of the white man is in your hands, and you must maintain it by giving this arrogant savage so bad a beating that he will never want to face a white man again."

"That will be my little game," the sport responded.

At this point the old medicine-man again made his appearance.

"The great chief of the Musselshell Sioux is ready and he waits for the white warrior," Nish-ma-wah announced.

"I am ready too!" the Fresh exclaimed. "By the way, is there any objection to this gentleman here witnessing the contest? I need some one to assist me, you know: a second, as the white men call such an assistant."

"He may come if he wishes," the old Indian replied.

Then the sport stripped for the fight.

He removed all the covering from the upper part of the body, so that he was naked to the waist, and both the old lawyer and the aged medicine-man were astonished by the revelation.

To use the sporting term, Blake "stripped big," and the display of muscles upon his well-knit form was wonderful.

"My goodness! you are about twice as big as I thought you were!" DeWitt exclaimed.

The old medicine-man did not say anything, but he shook his head in a solemn way, and there was a faint twinkle in his dark, sunken eyes, which seemed to suggest that he was pleased with the appearance of the white man.

When his preparations were completed, the Fresh announced that he was ready, and Nish-ma-wah led the way from the tepee.

When the party got into the open air they found that all the people of the village, young braves, old men, squaws and children, were assembled in a little open plain, by the banks of the river, only a few rods from the wigwam where the prisoners had been confined.

The Indians were squatting upon the ground, forming a circle, about fifty feet in diameter, the men in the front rank, and behind them the squaws and children.

In the center of the ring, naked to the waist, wearing only leggings and moccasins, was the Laughing Horse.

His arms were folded across his brawny chest, and the look upon his face plainly showed that he considered himself to be a very king among men.

The old medicine-man conducted the prisoners into the circle, and great was the interest which the appearance of the Fresh excited.

The red-skins were as much surprised by the muscular development of the white man as the old medicine-man had been, for now that the Laughing Horse and the pale-face champion stood side by side, so that they could be compared, the spectators discovered, to their amazement, that the Indian was not a larger man than his white opponent, for although he was about as big around, yet he was fully six inches shorter, and from the waist downward he could not compare with the Fresh, for his lower limbs were stunted and misshapen.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHITE AGAINST RED.

THE Laughing Horse was as much surprised too by the unexpected muscular development of the white man as any of the rest of the lookers-on.

From the fanciful way in which the sport

had been dressed when captured by the Indians, the Mussellschell chief had got the idea that the prisoner was a sort of a dude, as a miner would have said, and so he had flattered himself that he would not have any trouble in giving him a terrific thumping.

But now that the white man stood before him in battle array the chief had intelligence enough to see that his opponent was just about as good a man as himself as far as muscular development went, and then too he came into the circle with an easy, confident air which seemed to imply that he did not have any apprehensions in regard to the result of the contest.

The Laughing Horse was annoyed; not that he had any doubt in regard to beating the white man, for in his arrogance he felt sure that he could accomplish the feat, but because he realized that he had a task before him which would be pretty certain to be a difficult one, and this was something that he had not bargained for, having made the mistake of thinking the white man would prove to be an easy customer to handle.

"The white chief is ready!" the old medicine-man announced, advancing to the center of the circle.

"So is the Laughing Horse," responded the Sioux chieftain, unfolding his arms.

"I have told the white warrior that if he succeeds in defeating the chief of the Mussellschell Sioux, he is to go free," Nash-ma-wah continued.

"So it shall be."

And then in the Sioux language, for there were many in the throng who did not understand English, the old medicine-man told of the bargain which had been made with the white-skin.

The Indian braves nodded assent; it was their idea that the prisoner did not stand much chance to obtain his freedom, for there were few of the lookers-on who fancied that the pale-face would be able to defeat the Mussellschell chieftain.

Only the White Squaw and a few old men of the tribe, who did not have a good opinion of the arrogant young warrior, held to the belief that the Laughing Horse would not succeed in doing the task which he had so confidently taken upon himself.

But the rank and file of the tribe, and the squaws in particular, were strong partisans of the Laughing Horse.

Nothing in this world succeeds like success, and the rapid ascent to the chieftainship of the young warrior had caused the majority of the Sioux to regard him as being one of the greatest chiefs the tribe had ever known.

And the squaws were friendly to the young warrior because they knew that he and his half-sister, the White Squaw, did not get on well together, for a large number of the women of the tribe were jealous of the Speckled Pigeon on account of her being the daughter of a white woman.

After making the announcement the old medicine-man retired from the center of the ring and the contestants approached each other.

Expectation among the Indians was on tip-toe, for all of them knew of the message which the old medicine-man had received from the Great Spirit.

Upon the result of this contest depended the issue of the war which the Sioux Nation intended to wage against the whites.

If the Laughing Horse was beaten naught but disaster and defeat awaited the red-men.

It was not strange then that the dusky-skinned spectators watched the scene with almost breathless eagerness.

The foemen approached each other, the Fresh with his fists carried at about the level of his waist, the Laughing Horse with his clinched palms brandished in the air.

The two came within a couple of yards and then the red-man made a rapid dash at his foe, striking with right and left in an extremely ugly way, but none of the fierce strokes alighted on the person of the sport for, with surprising quickness, he ducked, dextrously avoiding the blows, then dodged under the arm of the red-man, and as the Laughing Horse turned in a clumsy way, endeavoring to follow him up, the Fresh caught him under the ear with a right-hander which fairly seemed to lift the Indian chieftain off his feet.

Backward he staggered for fully a yard, and the sport was prompt to improve the advantage which he had gained.

Blake followed the Laughing Horse up and seemed fairly to rain blows upon him.

The Indian struck out wildly, endeavoring to beat off the attack; but few of his blows reached Blake, and none of them did any particular damage.

Then the two clinched, and a thrill of fierce joy swept through the heart of the savage chief.

Now that he had the hated white man within his grip he would squeeze the life out of him.

But that was a game that two could play at, as the red-skin soon discovered.

The Fresh was a magnificent wrestler, as the reader knows who has followed the fortunes of Jackson Blake through the various tales in which he has figured as a hero, and when opposed to a

clumsy fellow like the Indian chief he had no difficulty in disposing of him.

A few moments the two struggled together, clinging to each other like two angry serpents, and then the Fresh "back-beeled" the Indian and brought him to the ground with tremendous force.

A long breath came from the throats of the savages, the tension of excitement being for a moment relaxed.

The Indians looked at each other with wondering faces, completely astonished by what had taken place.

They were not much used to this sort of thing—not good judges of a ring contest, for few of the lookers-on had seen many affairs of the kind—but it was plain to the most ignorant person upon the ground that the Indian champion had been terribly roughly handled without being able to damage his opponent.

The Laughing Horse came down like a log, and for a few moments he lay motionless as though stunned by the fall.

This was not so; all the trouble was in his wind, which was about gone; the exertion he had put forth, and the punishment he had received, for in the beginning of the clinch the Fresh had punched him in the ribs with both his right and left in a particularly unpleasant manner, made his breath come hard and short.

After the chief was down Blake retreated to the edge of the circle where the old lawyer stood and leaned on his shoulder.

The breath of the Fresh was coming decidedly quicker, for though the "round" had only lasted about a minute yet the work had been of a lively and fatiguing nature.

"Wonderful, wonderful!" DeWitt exclaimed in the ear of the sport.

"Upon my word! I must declare that I never saw anything like it!" he continued. "I would not have believed that it could be possible for such punishment to be inflicted."

"Oh, this isn't anything," Blake replied, speaking in a low tone so that no one but the old lawyer could hear his words.

"I have only just begun with the red buck. Wait until the next round when I will 'rush' him if you want to see some fun."

"I am going in to swing with my left for his body, just above the belt, and after I have cracked him there three or four times he will begin to think that his ribs are giving way."

"Yes, yes, I understand, and I must confess that I would not be willing to be in the place of your opponent for a thousand dollars," the old lawyer declared.

"Not for a thousand, eh?" the sport questioned with a smile.

"No, sir, decidedly not!" the old gentleman replied. "A thousand dollars would not be any temptation for me to stand up and allow you to hit me some of those awful blows."

By this time the Sioux chieftain had in a measure recovered his wind and was slowly rising to his feet.

"What he has received isn't anything to what he is going to get," the sport responded.

"Watch me now and see me swing for his heart, and if he isn't a pretty sick man after I get a half-a-dozen straight drives home with my left then I can't hit as hard as I think I can."

The laughing Horse was now on his feet and Blake advanced rapidly upon him.

The Indian, warned by his previous experience, broke ground and gave way, striving to call to memory all the boxing instructions he had received from the miners, who had thought it a great bit of fun to teach the red-man to fight in the white-skin's way.

Blake would not be denied, and followed the chief up so closely that he was forced to make a stand.

Then the sport played the old boxing trick upon him. He led what looked to be an extremely vicious right-hander at the Indian's head, but it was only a feint, and when the Laughing Horse threw up his hands to ward off the blow, leaving his body uncovered, the sharp improved the opportunity, and sending out his left as straight as a die, caught the red man a blow on the lower chest, just under the heart, which knocked the chief back a foot or more.

The force of the stroke made the Indian grunt with pain.

Never in all his life had the Laughing Horse received such a blow, and if he had not been sure the white man struck him with his fist, he would have been certain that he had been hit by a club.

The grunt of pain wrung from the chief was answered by another grunt which came in sympathy from the lips of the spectators.

As the sport had determined not to show any mercy to his antagonist before commencing the fight, he was prompt to follow up his man.

Already the red-man was in trouble, although the contest had only just begun, but the chief was not in a good condition for an encounter of this kind, being burdened with some extra pounds of useless fat which he would have been much better without.

Rendered desperate from the pain of the body blow the Indian endeavored to retaliate.

There was a rapid exchange of blows at close quarters, and though the red chief succeeded in getting in three or four chest blows, yet the strokes seemed to lack force, and did not discolor the skin of the white champion.

The Laughing Horse paid dearly for the attack though, for twice more the terrible left fist seemed to fairly crack the ribs of the red-man, and as the chief was forced back by the last body blow, the sport got a chance to swing his right in on the jaw of the Laughing Horse, and the force of the stroke was so great that the Indian at first was under the impression that the wonderful white man had knocked the whole lower part of his face away.

The stroke floored the chieftain and he "went to grass" as limp as a rag.

The sport was a little winded from his exertions, for he had done his best to "knock out," the red-man, and was not sorry for a breathing time.

As before he retreated and leaned on the shoulder of the old lawyer, who was fairly trembling with excitement, so interested had he become in this strange contest.

The old medicine-man had deemed it wise to go to the assistance of the Laughing Horse, for his experienced eyes detected that the chief was in a very bad way.

"If we were fighting under Marquis of Queensberry rules this would end the battle, for I have knocked him out," Blake remarked in De Witt's ear.

"You certainly have pounded him in a famous manner!" the old gentleman declared. "Of course, I do not know anything about the rules of which you speak, but you seemed to have taken the fight out of him in an extremely scientific manner."

"The time between rounds according to Queensberry rules is one minute: three minute rounds, and one minute's rest; and if a man is not ready to renew the fight after one minute has elapsed he is said to be knocked out."

"Ah, well, that fellow will not toe the mark in a minute's time, or I greatly miss my guess," De Witt declared.

"No, it will be three or four before he is up, I fancy," the sport responded.

"But he can take all the time he wants for all I care," Blake remarked.

"We are fighting under Sioux rules and the Marquis of Queensberry is not in it. This is going to be a fight to the finish and the only question now is, how much punishment will this fellow be willing to endure?"

"If he isn't a fool he ought to know by this time that he does not stand any chance, and the longer he keeps at it the worse it will be for him," the old lawyer remarked.

"Yes, you are right, and if the fellow was wise he would throw up the sponge now," Blake observed.

"Well, I should think that after what he has gone through he would not be so dull-witted as to imagine that he has any chance at all with you."

"He is an obstinate fellow, and chuck full of self-conceit I should judge from what I have heard of him, and it is a mighty hard matter for a man of that kind to acknowledge that he is whipped, particularly when the operation takes place right in his own town and in the presence of his people."

"He has been strutting around boasting that he is one of the biggest warriors that the Sioux nation has ever known, and it is a terrible downfall for him to have to openly admit that the first white man he tried on was too much for him."

"Ah, yes, that is very true, but in this case the old saying fits in admirably that it isn't any use for a man to kick against the pricks, and the longer he does so the worse it will be for him."

"Very true, but it is awful hard work sometimes for a man to make up his mind to quit. It is a wise man who knows when it is time to get out," the Fresh remarked with the air of a philosopher.

While this conversation had been going on the old medicine-man had been doing his best to revive the Laughing Horse.

Blake was right in his surmise, the Indian had been knocked out and it was a good three minutes before he recovered his senses.

Then he looked in a dazed manner into the face of Nish-ma-wah.

The old medicine-man had raised him to a sitting posture and was supporting the chief's head on his knee.

Laughing Horse had never been remarkable for his good looks and now he appeared perfectly hideous, for the iron-like fists of the sport had left their marks on the countenance of the savage.

He had two well-developed black eyes, and his nose, always an extra prominent feature of his face, was now swollen to twice its usual size; there was, too, a big lump of swollen flesh on his chest where the Fresh had given him such terrible thumps.

In fine, the Indian brave answered very well indeed to the description of the man described in the western yarn as having passed through a thrashing machine.

"How is it with the great chief?" asked the old medicine-man, in a sympathetic tone, as the dark, ugly eyes of the Laughing Horse unclosed and looked him in the face.

But although Nish-ma-wah spoke as though he was deeply grieved by the condition in which the Sioux chieftain found himself, yet in his "heart of hearts" he was delighted to see the arrogant young chief receive so fearful a drubbing.

"Wah, this white man's 'medicine' is good," the Indian growled.

A slave to superstition, like the majority of the red-men, he ascribed the easy triumph of his foe to the fact that the white man's "medicine"—that is charm to bring good luck—was stronger than his own.

"Yes, my brother has the worst of the fight," the old medicine-man declared, with a solemn shake of the head.

"Is this man a devil, then, like the Red Rattlesnake, that I can not harm him?" the Laughing Horse demanded, angrily.

"He is a mighty warrior—his fists seemed to be as hard as the rock," Nish-ma-wah answered.

"And when I clasp him in my arms he wriggles from my clutch as though he was a serpent and not a man."

"A mighty warrior!" the other repeated, in a solemn manner.

"But I will die in my tracks before he shall boast that he can conquer me!" the Indian declared, rising to his feet with difficulty, for his joints were beginning to grow stiff.

"You are right, my brother!" the old medicine-man declared, anxious to get the chief to keep on so that he might receive more punishment.

Nish-ma-wah knew well enough that the worse the thrashing the buck received the smaller would be his influence over the warriors of the tribe.

It is the same with the Indians as with their civilized white brothers, they have no use for a beaten man.

The successful warrior is the one who carries the crowd with him, and the quicker the defeated man gets out of sight and hides himself away in some dark corner the better it is for him.

"Remember, the fate of the war is in your hands," Nish-ma-wah continued.

"If the white man triumphs the Sioux braves would be fools to take the war-path, for naught but disaster and defeat awaits them."

The Laughing Horse fairly groaned aloud when these words fell upon his ears, for he was well-aware that unless some unforeseen accident helped him he stood no more chance to beat the white man than to move the mountains with a wave of his hand.

The issue of the Indian struggle depended upon his exertions and here he was terribly punished, sore in every limb, and no more fit to longer contend with the iron-fisted white man than if he had been a fifteen year old boy.

"I'll conquer him or die!" the Laughing Horse fairly hissed between his firm-set teeth as he advanced to meet the sport.

Blake was ready for him, for he had kept his eyes on the chief all the time that he had been conversing with De Witt.

The sport was prompt to commence hostilities; he knew that he had his man whipped, and was anxious to bring the matter to an end.

So the moment he got within reach he rushed at the chief with the fury of a tiger.

With both right and left he banged the Indian on the jaw, the chief being so utterly worn out by his exertion that he could not parry the blows, although he made a weak attempt to do so.

Four times, in rapid succession, the sport reached the weak spot on the jaw, knocking the Indian about like a shuttlecock, and the Laughing Horse, dazed by the terrific blows, began to get the idea that there wasn't much of his chin left.

Then the Fresh steadied himself and measuring his man carefully sent in a terrific right-hander, which alighted right between the eyes, knocking the warrior over on his back just about as quickly as though he been shot.

The Laughing Horse was "knocked out," this time for good and all.

He was senseless when he struck the ground and although the old medicine-man, assisted by the other braves, worked to restore him, it was a half-an-hour before his senses returned.

CHAPTER XV.

KEEPING THE COMPACT.

THE old medicine-man had raised the chief to a sitting posture, supporting his head on his knees, while the Fresh retreated to where the old lawyer stood, at the side of the circle.

De Witt was trembling with excitement.

"Splendid! glorious!" the old lawyer exclaimed in the ear of the sport. "I never saw anything like it in all my life!"

"We have had a pretty lively rally," Blake responded, his breath coming quickly, and his chest heaving up and down, plain proof that he had been indulging in some violent exercise.

"Really, now, it looks as if you had killed the man."

"No, I reckon not," the Fresh replied. "These red sons of the wilderness are made of too stout

stuff to be unceremoniously buried out of the world in such a fashion."

"Do you think he will come around all right?"

"Undoubtedly!"

"But you gave him a most unmerciful pounding," the old lawyer remarked, with a grave shake of the head, as though he was not convinced that the sport's surmise was correct.

"Yes, that is true; I don't believe that any man in Montana ever had his hide better tanned," the Fresh remarked, with a quiet smile.

"But it is not a killing matter, you know," he added. "He is too tough to have the life hammered out of him by human fists; it would take a club to lay him out for good and all!"

"Yes, yes, I suppose so."

And then the pair waited and watched in silence until the Indian chief, by a faint movement of his head, showed signs of returning consciousness.

"You are right, he isn't dead!" De Witt exclaimed.

"I felt quite sure that he was not," the Fresh responded.

"Do you think he will want to renew the battle?"

"No, not unless he is a great deal bigger idiot than I take him to be," the sport replied, grimly.

"If he is not a complete fool, and is possessed of any common sense whatever, he ought to be satisfied by this time that he does not stand any chance, and that the longer he fights, the worse it will be for him."

"Yes, he surely ought to be certain now," the old lawyer affirmed.

"I do not doubt that he would like to keep on, but I reckon he has been punished too severely for him to do it."

"The will is good but the flesh is weak."

"That is about the size of it," the Fresh affirmed.

And it was the truth.

Despite the fierce rage that burned in the heart of the Sioux chieftain, and the burning desire that he had to be revenged upon the white man who had conquered him so easily, he was physically so weak that it was as much as he could do to stand.

A renewal of the battle was out of the question.

His head was all wrong, too, and felt as if it did not belong to him.

"Can the great chief renew the fight?" the old medicine-man asked, peering earnestly in the face of the warrior, as soon as he saw that the Laughing Horse had recovered sufficiently to comprehend what was said to him.

Nish-ma-wah felt perfectly certain that the Sioux chief had got all the fighting that he had stomach for when he put the question, but it was his game to get the Laughing Horse to admit that he was beaten before all the tribe.

"Ugh! the white man's medicine is too big," the Laughing Horse responded, slowly, it being as much as he could do to speak, and the effort caused him to relapse into unconsciousness again.

"The Great Spirit is angry with his red children, and frowns on them," the old medicine-man announced, with a weighty shake of his massive head, which struck awe into the hearts of the Sioux.

Then Nish-ma-wah had the beaten chieftain removed to his wigwam.

"That settles it!" the sport remarked to De Witt. "The red-skin has thrown up the sponge, figuratively speaking, and I have secured my freedom."

"My dear fellow, I congratulate you!" the old lawyer exclaimed.

"Thank you! I have not been worrying myself much about the matter, for the moment the proposition was made me to fight the chief, with the proviso that I could go free if I whipped him, I felt certain that the way was open for me to escape from this hole."

"Ah, yes, I understand, and I do not wonder at your confidence. You knew what you could do, and therefore was positive that the savage did not stand any chance."

"Exactly!"

"If he had chosen to fight you with weapons, rifles or pistols, or something of that sort, your chances would not have been so good," the old gentleman suggested.

"Well—I don't know about that," the Fresh responded with his quiet, confident smile.

"The fact is, you see, I am what is called an all-round athlete," Blake explained. "And it is a pretty hard matter to find any branch of sport at which I am not an expert."

"Is that possible?" asked the old lawyer, amazed.

"Oh, yes; there is hardly a weapon that the Indian could have chosen of which I am not a perfect master, and the end of the contest would not have been different, as far as defeat and victory are concerned; that is, in all probability, you know; of course an accident might have altered the result."

"Yes, yes, I comprehend."

"In my opinion, though, it was wise for the red-skin to decide to fight with fists, for if he had chosen a weapon the chances are big, in my opinion, that when we got through the fight, the Sioux nation would have had to go through the

formality of choosing another great chief; for I reckon I would have been likely to put the Laughing Horse in a condition for planting."

"Well, from what I have seen of your abilities in the fighting line I should judge you were about right in your estimate."

"I think so, and I am not a man who cares to flatter himself, you understand," the sport declared. "I always strive to discover all my weaknesses so as to prevent disastrous consequences arising therefrom. The man who knows where he is weak, and is wise enough to look out for that quarter, may be considered to be strong."

"Oh, yes, no doubt about it," the old lawyer assented.

"But I say, you seem to speak very confidently in regard to being set at liberty," De Witt added. "Ain't you afraid that the Indians may not live up to their agreement?"

"Oh, no, not the least danger of that, to my thinking," the sport replied, confidently.

"Well, I hope so," the old gentleman observed, and from the tone in which he spoke it was plain that he had serious doubts about the subject.

"I know the red-men pretty well, for during my sojourn in the West I have spent considerable time in their villages and so had the opportunity to become well acquainted with the manners and customs of the Indians; therefore I am able to do them the justice of saying that as a whole they hold to their words much better on the average than the white men do."

"Really, you surprise me!"

"It is a fact, and in this case, if they don't keep the agreement they made with me, and allow me to depart, unharmed, I shall be very much astonished."

"And, by the way, I may as well get my clothes on, so as to be all in readiness to light out."

Then the sport turned to the Sioux chief who had charge of the wigwam wherein the prisoners had been confined, the Spotted Calf, and asked if he might resume his clothes.

The Spotted Calf looked daggers—as the saying is—at the cool and self-possessed white man, for he was one of the nearest friends of the Laughing Horse.

He was terribly enraged at the defeat that his chief had suffered, and, willingly, would have wreaked vengeance upon the conquering white man if he could have seen his way clear to accomplish it.

At present, though, he was not able to gratify his passion for vengeance, and so he contented himself with scowling at the sport as he nodded his head to show that he had no objection to offer to the request of Blake.

Little cared the redoubtable Fresh of 'Frisco for the scowls of any man, and so, when he noticed the angry look upon the features of the Indian warrior, he laughed in his face, a proceeding which made the Spotted Calf fairly grit his teeth with rage, but as he did not see his way clear to resent the affront just at present, he was obliged to "grin and bear it," which the Indian really did, without any exaggeration.

The sport proceeded to the wigwam, donned his clothes, and then returned to his former position.

Just as he returned, the old medicine-man made his appearance, having seen the Laughing Horse safely bestowed in his lodge.

Nish-ma-wah advanced to the center of the circle, and the sport accosted him.

"I claim the fulfillment of your promise," he said. "If I conquered your great chief my mule and arms were to be returned to me, and I was to be allowed to go free."

"The white man speaks with a straight tongue," the old medicine-man announced, with great dignity. "So it was said."

"And will my red brother keep his promise?" the Fresh demanded.

"Ay—as sure as that the night succeeds the day," Nish-ma-wah replied.

"The great medicine-man of the Sioux nation cannot speak with a forked tongue. The white shall go free, because he is a mighty warrior, and when he reaches the lodges of his people let him not forget to say that the red warriors kept their word with the white-skin."

"I shall remember, and you can rest assured that I will do the Sioux braves full justice," the sport declared.

Then Nish-ma-wah ordered some of the young warriors to bring the white man's mule and his arms.

When they departed upon their mission Blake seized upon the opportunity to say a parting word to the old lawyer, who had watched the scene with curious eyes.

"Well, upon my word, my dear fellow, I really believe that you are going to get out of it!" the old gentleman declared.

"Oh, yes; if you remember, I told you that I did not think there was any doubt about the Indians living up to the agreement."

"Well, well, I am glad you are going, of course, although loth to lose your company, and I sincerely hope that I and Miss Vanderhoven will be able to get out of this scrape with as little trouble."

"Don't you worry now about the matter, for

you are all right!" the sport declared. "And if you get a chance to speak to the young lady just be sure to tell her that everything will come out all straight in the long run."

"I hope so, my dear fellow, I hope so, and, really, I begin to believe you have inspired me with some of your magnificent confidence, for I do not feel half as anxious about the matter as I did."

"That is right; keep up a stout heart!" the sport advised.

"This victory of mine will benefit you and Miss Vanderhoven as well as myself," the Fresh explained.

"The Indians, you know, had a message from the Great Spirit, by the way of the old medicine-man, that upon the result of the fight depended the issue of the war which they were about to begin against the whites."

"If the Laughing Horse had been able to cook my goose for me, then the red-skins would have gone upon the war-trail with joyful hearts, being perfectly satisfied that they would not have any trouble in cleaning out the white men, but as it is, I doubt if they will dare to go to war at all."

"The red bucks are fearfully superstitious, and to go ahead with the enterprise now, after having been warned by the Great Spirit that they cannot expect any success, will be more than the majority of them will want to do."

"Yes, yes; I comprehend, and I have no doubt that your ideas are correct; the superstitious red-men will hesitate to go to war."

"Exactly, and if they want peace they will be careful not to commit any outrages, so I think they will speedily release you," Blake observed.

"Yes, yes; I think there is no danger now that we will be harmed."

"As soon as I am free I shall push forward as fast as I can for Fort Scott, and will acquaint the colonel there with the fact of your captivity."

"My dear fellow, if you will be so kind I shall be ever so much obliged to you!" the old lawyer declared, pressing the sport's hand warmly.

"Don't mention it! That is all right; I will do what I can for you."

"If this Colonel Poindexter is a good soldier he will take speedy measures to convince the Sioux that the quicker they release you and the young lady the better it will be for them."

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the mule.

CHAPTER XVI.

A FRIENDLY WARNING.

THE sport gave the old lawyer's hand a farewell shake and advanced to the animal, whose bridle the young braves had given into the hand of the old medicine-man.

Nish-ma-wah had the sport's weapons ready for him, and Blake received them with a visible expression of delight.

Then he vaulted to the back of the mule.

"There, I feel something like myself again!" he announced.

"I am much obliged to you red gentlemen for your hospitality, but I don't think that I shall be apt to trouble you again for a long while, that is, if I have any say about the matter," he added with one of his peculiar, quiet smiles.

"Does my brother know the way to the lodges of the white men?" the Ground Hog asked.

"Yes, I reckon I can find the road without much difficulty. I must follow this stream until it runs into the Musselshell, and then turn to the west and keep on up along the bank of the river."

"My white brother is right; that is the way to go," the old medicine-man replied.

"Farewell, you are a mighty warrior and it will be many moons before the Sioux braves will have a chance to look upon as good a man as yourself," Nish-ma-wah continued with stately dignity.

"Much obliged for the compliment," the sport responded with a polite bow. "But good man or not there is one rule I always try to live up to and that is to do my level best no matter how I may be situated."

Then the sport favored the Indians with a courteous parting salutation and rode out of the circle, taking the trail which led down the valley.

The majority of the red-skins returned the Fresh's salutation, gravely inclined their heads while the muttered words, "Big medicine! Heap powerful!" escaped from their lips.

There were a few who scowled and fingered their hunting-knives, as though they would like to try the sport's metal at that sort of game; these were the rash young warriors of the tribe, personal friends of the Laughing Horse, who felt angered and humiliated by his defeat, but there wasn't any one of them who cared to challenge the white man to a single combat with the idea of finding out whether he was as good with a weapon as he had proved himself to be with his fists.

And as the Fresh of 'Frisco encountered these angry glances a scornful expression came over his mobile face, and between his teeth he muttered:

"Ay, ay, scowl all you like, you red dogs! There is not one of you who dares to do more than scowl!"

On the Indian encampment, down the narrow trail, past the Indian sentinels stationed at the lower end of the little valley so as to guard against a surprise, went the sport.

Below the valley was a rough and broken country which abruptly descended for a mile or so, and the nature of the ground was such that from their elevated posts the Indian sentinels could command a view of the trail for fully a mile.

Blake noted this fact as he rode along.

"Well, there is no gainsaying that the red-skins selected a particularly strong point for their village," he mused.

"A hundred well-armed, determined men ought to be able to hold these hills against a force of three times their number."

"Artillery would be the only thing that would be apt to bother the red-skins, and it would be a wonderful battery, with wonderful horses, to be able to get up a trail like this."

By the time that the sport came to the end of his reflections he had got through the foot-hills and now his way led along an open table-land, studded here and there with timber islands, and the road bent around to the west so that it was completely hidden from view of the sentinels perched on the crest of the hill.

Although he was apparently safe out of the Indians' hands, yet the Fresh proceeded with extreme caution.

He rode with his left hand on the rein while his right hand held his rifle across the pommel of his saddle, the hammer raised, so that he was all ready for action.

"There is no telling but what I may run into some stray bucks who have not had the honor of being introduced to me, and therefore do not know that I am loaded and warranted to be dangerous," the Fresh soliloquized.

"Seeing a solitary white man wandering in their territory they might take it into their heads that it would be a good idea to make it warm for him; it would be quite a feather in their caps, with this war fever running so high just now, if they could bring a pale-face scalp into the Indian village; it would be the first trophy of the war and the braves lucky enough to win it would own the camp for a while."

While uttering these reflections the keen eyes of the Fresh narrowly surveyed the country in advance of him.

He was going on the idea that behind each rock a red-skinned warrior might lurk, or that concealed in the center of a friendly tree-clump a buckskin-garbed, painted chief waited for his coming to drive home the death-dealing ball. So acting upon this imagining he took pains to give a wide berth to all suspicious places.

About half-way across this open plain he progressed, and then his keen eyes detected that behind a clump of scraggly junipers a human form was hiding.

A light pressure on the rein checked the motion of the well-trained mule, and in a second the Winchester rifle leaped to the shoulder of the sport and his keen eyes gleamed along the barrel.

"Come out, I see you!" he cried.

And then, to the astonishment of the Fresh of 'Frisco, out from the shelter of the junipers stepped the White Squaw of the Sioux.

She raised her hand in a commanding gesture, while a bright smile illuminated her handsome features.

"Do not fire, Fresh of 'Frisco," she exclaimed. "It is I, the Speckled Pigeon—your friend!"

"All right!" And again the Winchester resumed its place on the pommel of the saddle while a touch of the heel put the mule again in motion, until the rider's hand compelled a halt by the side of the junipers.

"This is an agreeable surprise," Blake remarked.

"I am about the last person in the world that you expected to see?" the White Squaw observed.

"Yes, that is true."

"Yet you were on the watch for some one."

"I had an idea that I might run across some wandering bucks, and from the way that matters stand it would be natural for the braves to go for me without much warning," the sport explained.

"Yes, that is true, but there is little danger of your meeting with any stragglers, for about all of the warriors are in the village."

"Well, it was not possible for me to know that, you know, and as I am one of the kind of men who never take any chances, if it is possible for me to help myself, I was proceeding with as much caution as though there was danger of my running into a war-party at any moment."

"You are wise, and you are a great warrior, as my red brothers would say," the girl remarked with an admiring glance at the adventurer.

"Thank you!" the sport responded with a polite bow.

"I assure you I appreciate the compliment,

and none the less because I have a firm conviction that it is not far from the truth. "I am no boaster, you know," the Fresh continued. "But it would be false modesty for me to say that I am not conscious of being able to hold my own, for I am well aware that it will take an extra good man to beat me, and any ordinary fellows stands no chance with me at all."

"I suppose you are aware of the result of my encounter with the Laughing Horse, who had an idea that he was about the biggest man in creation?"

"Oh, yes, I saw the contest from the beginning to the end," the girl replied. "And I assure you I am deeply grateful, for you have performed a service to my tribe of wonderful value."

"Urged on by the Laughing Horse, and a few more rash young warriors, who were not capable of understanding how utterly foolish was their action, the Sioux were contemplating making war on the whites, and the certain result of the war would have been the destruction of the Musselshell Sioux."

"No doubt about that; a man might as well attempt to break a stone wall with his head as for the red-men to brave the power of the Government," the sport declared.

"Your defeat of the chief will undoubtedly put an end to all thoughts of war," the White Squaw responded.

"It is difficult for me to express in words how thankful I am, but I was desirous that you should understand how I feel about the matter, and so I hurried to intercept you, taking advantage of a short cut through the foot-hills."

"The trail, you see, bends around in a circle, so that it is fully a mile nearer to the valley by the short cut," she explained.

"Yes, I understand, and the road is so bad too that a man on horseback can't make much better time than if he was on foot."

"Very true; so it was an easy matter for me to intercept you, particularly as I left the camp before you did."

"Well, really, you need not have put yourself to all this trouble," Blake remarked. "By serving you I served myself; but I don't suppose I would have hammered the fellow quite so hard if you had not explained to me how matters stood."

"When I comprehended how the game was running I went in to give the chief such a thrashing that he would be apt to have to take to his bed for a few days, so as to cool the war fever in the veins of the young bucks."

"Again I thank you for the service!" the Indian girl exclaimed, gratefully.

"Don't mention it! As I said before, it is all right," the sport replied.

"But it was not alone for the purpose of tendering you my thanks that I came to intercept you," the White Squaw declared.

The Fresh looked surprised.

"I think that danger threatens, and I came to warn you to be on your guard."

"I am much obliged. In what shape will the danger come?"

"After the contest ended, and the Spotted Calf came with you from the wigwam where you dressed, I noticed him in earnest conversation with one of the young braves known as the Blue Dog."

"These two are the close friends of the Laughing Horse, and when I saw them talking earnestly together with bended brows I surmised that they were plotting mischief."

"A very natural supposition!" the Fresh declared, with an approving nod.

"The conversation lasted but a few minutes, and then the two slunk away to their wigwams, which are on the outskirts of the village."

"I followed cautiously, determined to keep a close watch upon them."

"That was a wise proceeding."

"I fancied from their angry looks, and the baleful glances that they cast at you, that they had concocted some plot of which you was to be the victim."

"That was a reasonable conclusion under the circumstances."

"So I considered," the Indian girl replied.

"After the pair procured their rifles they stole from their wigwams, and hastened toward the foot-hills, where they disappeared among the bushes."

"I was the only one who noticed this movement, for all the people were in the center of the valley listening to your conversation with the old medicine-man."

"Yes, I see; it was an easy matter for the pair to get away without attracting observation," the adventurer observed, thoughtfully.

"If I had not happened to notice the two in conversation, I should not have thought of watching them."

"No, I suppose not."

"These young men, I think, intend to revenge the defeat of their friend by waylaying you."

"Very likely. They are not satisfied with the taste of my quality that they have already got and are hankering for more," the sport observed, in his dry way.

"It certainly seems like it."

"Well, I will try and oblige the bucks, and if they don't succeed in getting me at such a dis-

advantage that I will not stand any show for my life, I may be able to astonish them."

"They took advantage of the short cut to plan an ambush, and so I warn you."

"Thanks!"

"And now, farewell! May the Great Spirit who watches alike over the Indian and the pale-face protect you!" cried the White Squaw, as she hurried away.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PRAIRIE FIGHT.

BLAKE watched the well-proportioned form of the Indian maid as she hastened onward until she disappeared amid the shrubbery.

"That girl is the clear white article, and no mistake, even if she does happen to be a little off color in complexion," the Fresh remarked.

"She professes to be grateful to me because I warned the big chief, but under the circumstances it was Hobson's choice as far as I was concerned. I either had to knock the big chief out or be knocked out myself."

And the sport laughed quietly to himself as he reflected upon what a sorry picture the great fighting man of the Sioux nation had cut at the end of the fight.

"There is no mistaking the fact that the White Squaw has done me a signal service in giving me warning of this ambushade, for although I was on my guard, yet the bucks might have succeeded in picking me off."

"But as it is, unless the red-skins take advantage of some point to pop at me where it will be almost an impossibility for them to miss me, the chances are big that I will be able to give them a good fight."

"And now then, Jackson Blake, let your eyes and ears do their best, for in all your life there never was need of better work!"

Again the sharp resumed his onward way, proceeding with the utmost caution.

The trail now passed over more level ground so the sport was able to proceed more rapidly.

For a couple of miles his way led over an open prairie, where there wasn't any chance for a foe to find concealment, then the timber islands appeared again and Blake proceeded with increased caution.

When a man gets used to the wild life of the wilderness through long experience, in a certain degree the instinctive sense of the birds and beasts seems to come to him and he is able to detect hidden danger where the average mortal would not suspect it lurked.

And in this case, when Blake got in about the center of the prairie, his attention was directed to a clump of cedars about a quarter of a mile off, and within a hundred yards of the trail.

There wasn't anything in particular about this especial clump of trees to call for attention, excepting that they afforded ample concealment for three or four men, but, in some mysterious way, the moment the sharp caught sight of the cedars the idea came to him that the red chiefs were concealed therein.

"A nice, easy shot!" he muttered, as the mule loped onward toward the tree clump.

"If the red bucks are not able to pick me off as I ride by them they are a couple of chumps!"

"That is their idea, of course; they will wait until I get within range and then they will go for me."

"A nice little game!" the Fresh exclaimed, with a sarcastic smile, "but it will not work!"

And then, having carefully measured the distance that intervened between himself and the clump of cedars with his eyes, and being satisfied that he was nearly within range, he abruptly sheered off to the right, taking a course which would not bring him within a couple of hundred yards of the trees.

"It takes a good shot to plug a man on a moving horse six or seven hundred feet away!" the sport declared, as he executed this movement.

Then he touched his heels to the side of the mule, and the well-trained beast immediately quickened his pace.

It was by no mere chance that the sharp took it into his head to force the animal along at a little better pace, but on the contrary he was acting on a carefully devised plan.

And the game worked too just exactly as the Fresh had expected.

The two Sioux warriors, Spotted Calf and Blue Dog, were concealed amid the cedars, and when they saw the white-skin bend off to the right, and increase the speed of his mule, they at once jumped to the conclusion from the abrupt manner in which the maneuver had been performed that the sport had discovered the ambush, so they at once fired upon him.

As was to be expected under the circumstances both of the bullets went wide of the mark, and the Fresh yelled forth a shrill note of defiance.

Then he rode his mule behind a giant boulder, which cropped out of the earth near at hand, slipped down from the back of the animal, and hastily tethered him by means of the lariat.

Back of the rock, and surrounding it on three sides, was a dense growth of pines, so that when the mule was placed behind the boulder, he was almost completely sheltered from an attack.

It only took the sport a few moments to perform this movement, and then he returned to face the red-skins again.

The braves were in front of the evergreens which had afforded them concealment.

The abrupt action on the part of the Fresh puzzled them, and when they saw that their bullets had not harmed him, they hesitated, uncertain what to do.

When Blake came from behind the rock and perceived the warriors halting in front of the evergreens, he was not slow in jumping to a conclusion in regard to them.

"Aha! you are a little bothered, eh?" he exclaimed.

"Don't exactly understand my game, and you are waiting to see what I am going to do?"

And the sport laughed.

"I don't doubt that you two red bucks thought that you were going to have a heap of fun with me," the Fresh continued.

"You provided yourselves with a couple of the best ponies in the band, and you reckoned that if you did not succeed in knocking me over at the first pop, you could easily run me down, for although a mule is a mighty good beast for a traveler on a long journey, yet when it comes to a race for life, the long-eared 'critter' is not up to the work."

"But the picnic is not progressing according to the programme that you laid out," and at this point the adventurer indulged in a hearty chuckle.

"You ambushed your man all right, but after you missed your mark, the victim didn't trust to his mule's hoofs for safety, as you calculated."

"On the contrary, he shows fight, and though as a rule, to get your man off his steed, is the game you red devils always try to play, yet on the present occasion the thing isn't going to work in the way you would like to have it."

"The white man is dismounted, but his steed is safe, and if you want his scalp, you will have to work to earn it."

And then in the exuberance of his spirits he slapped the butt of his rifle and made a gesture of defiance to the red braves.

This proceeding kindled their rage at once.

"The white dog defies us!" the Spotted Calf cried, angrily.

"The pale-face is mad if he thinks he can escape," the Blue Dog exclaimed.

And then the wily red-men set to work to devise a plan by means of which they might be able to take the scalp of the white-skin without endangering their own safety.

The reader must not think that this was a proof that the Sioux warriors were not as brave as lions, for they were, but it is a cardinal principle with the Indians to always go into a fight with all the advantages on their side, if it is possible for them to so arrange the matter, and the red-men have been known to delay an attack for a week, or even a month, until they could get matters arranged to their satisfaction.

Then, on the other hand, when the red warriors are cornered—placed at such a terrible disadvantage that to resist was certain death, they have entered upon the fight with grim determination, scorning to ask for quarter.

The Fresh was quick to notice the consultation and he understood what it meant.

"Aha! trying to hatch up some little scheme so that you will be able to take my scalp without having to work very hard for it, eh?" he ejaculated as he placed his back against the rock, and surveyed the red warriors with a sarcastic smile.

"Well, the odds are two to one, and that ought to insure your winning this fight, provided I am not a better fighter than both of you two put together, but, I reckon, that is just where the hitch comes in; that is a point though which cannot be settled without an actual trial, for all the arguments in the world will not decide the question."

"To my thinking the odds are big that neither one of the two can hold a candle to me when it comes to rifle-shooting, and within the next ten minutes I think I will be able to convince these red gentlemen of that fact if they will have the kindness to come within rifle range."

The sport was correct in his conjectures.

The Indian braves were perplexed at his adopting a course so opposite to the one which they supposed he would follow, and they had put their heads together to arrange a scheme by means of which they would be able to slay him with as little risk to themselves as possible.

In an attack of this kind, it is the game of the red warriors to disable the horse as soon as possible, so as to cut off the escape of the destined victim, but as the Fresh had stowed his mule away in the evergreen thicket, this part of the game could not be worked.

The bold action of the sport, though, in coming out in open sight and with defiant action, challenging the pair to mortal combat, made the red warriors angry, and so they made up their minds to show the braggart white man that he was not as great a fighter as he thought, even if they had to risk their own precious persons in the attempt.

The plan that the warriors formed was the old familiar one which the prairie red-skins have used from the time when they first encountered

the white man on the trackless plains of the wilderness.

After the brief consultation the warriors separated. The Spotted Calf rode off to the right and the Blue Dog to the left.

"Aha! going to try the old game, eh?" the Fresh exclaimed, as soon as the warriors proceeded to execute the maneuver.

"It is your calculation that I will not be able to keep my eyes on both of you, and so that while I am busy with one the other will have a chance to take me in the rear."

"Maybe you can work it, but I have serious doubts in regard to the matter."

"And now, what is my game?" the sport added, in a reflective way.

"In the first place, you two red rascals are nothing better than a pair of cowardly assassins for you would have shot me down in cold blood, without giving me a chance for my life, if I had not been sharp enough to smell out the trap."

"Now, then, I am not the kind of man to allow a trick of that kind to be attempted at my expense without calling the men who put up the job to an account."

"You tried to kill me, therefore I am going to do my best to lay you out, and the first point is for me to disable your ponies so you will not be able to escape quite so handily, if you should suddenly come to the conclusion that when you went into this little scheme you bit off more than you will be able to chew, to use the good old western saying."

"In a minute or so both of you will be within rifle range and then we will see what we will see!"

The Fresh was leaning against the boulder with his eyes fixed intently upon the two warriors.

The ponies of the pair were proceeding at a walk, and they were riding in a circle with the rock as a center point, but as they rode they were gradually drawing nearer and nearer to the sport.

With the eye of a hawk the Fresh watched the pair.

For a couple of minutes the red-skins went on their way, and the peculiar glint of fire appeared in the keen eyes of the sport, the sign that always signified that he was about to take an active part.

"Now then, you red devils, the performance is about to begin, and, unless I am greatly mistaken, you will be mightily astonished before the picnic is ended."

According to the sport's calculation the Blue Dog was a trifle nearer the rock than his companion and so he selected his horse for a target.

Down dropped the sport on one knee and up came the rifle to his shoulder.

The red-skins were quick to perceive the motion, and though from the fact that they had not damaged the Fresh when they fired at him they had doubts as to their being within rifle-range, yet in order to be on the sure side they came the old Indian dodge of sheltering themselves behind the bodies of their horses.

They slipped out of the rude skin saddles, and all that was visible of the braves was red hands clutching the ponies' shaggy manes and the toes of a couple of moccasined feet projecting over the ponies' hips.

This maneuver can only be performed by a practiced rider, being a trick which would bother any one but a circus performer, or an Indian brave, who constantly practices at such maneuvers from the time that he is big enough to keep a seat upon a horse's back.

"Very nicely done, my boys!" the sport exclaimed, a grim smile curling his lips.

"But this little bit of circus business will not interfere with me at all as it happens; for it is not you two men but your steeds that I am after."

And then, just as the last word escaped from his lips, he pulled the trigger of his rifle.

There was a puff of smoke followed by the shrill report of the rifle, waking the echoes of the wilderness.

The aim of Blake was true, and the death-dealing ball went straight to the mark.

Over went the pony ridden by the Blue Dog, and it was only by a dextrous movement that the chief escaped being crushed beneath the body of the unfortunate beast.

The Spotted Calf, peeping out from under his horse's neck, witnessed the destructive effect of the shot, and was so enraged by the fact that he halted his pony, resumed his seat in the saddle, and bringing his rifle to the shoulder took deliberate aim at the Fresh, burning with a desire to avenge the death of the horse.

The sport laughed outright as he turned the muzzle of his rifle in the direction of the Spotted Calf.

Not a moment did the Fresh dwell on his aim though, for he was one of the marksmen who could take as sure an aim with a snap-shot as an ordinary rifleman with all the elaborate care usual in a shooting gallery.

And, therefore, he was able to anticipate the Indian's shot by a second.

The two reports were so near together that one sounded like the echo of the other.

There was a wide difference though in the accuracy of the shots.

The red-skin fired too low, although it was a good line-shot, for the bullet went into the ground, twenty-five feet away from Blake.

The sport did not make any such mistake, though. A fairer target than the Indian warrior presented, seated on his pony, with his dark figure outlined against the sky, a marksman would not have desired.

And such a shot as the Fresh of 'Frisco, could not miss so easy a mark, unless there was something the matter with either the gun or the ammunition.

But the Indian chief was a doomed man, for on this occasion the weapon worked to perfection.

The leaden missile struck the Spotted Calf full in the chest.

From his hands dropped the Winchester—his features were distorted with pain—wildly he clutched at the air with his outstretched fingers, then pitched headlong to the ground, and before he struck the earth the soul of the Indian warrior had taken its flight from its earthly tenement to the red-man's realms of bliss, the Happy Hunting-Grounds.

"That account is squared, and now for the other!" Blake exclaimed, springing to his feet as soon as he saw that his shot had proved effective.

The Blue Dog also assumed an erect position at the same moment, and a howl of rage came from him when he saw his companion fall.

It was plain to him from the way in which the red chief went down that he was hard hit, and a wild desire for vengeance upon the victorious white-skin came to him on the instant.

But before he could make a movement toward the accomplishment of this purpose, Blake began offensive operations, so the chief was put upon the defensive.

The Fresh was satisfied when the Spotted Calf came tumbling from his horse that his race was run, and no more danger was to be apprehended from him, so he was at liberty to turn his entire attention to the other.

It was a common joke of Jackson Blake's that it was but seldom anybody accused him of "being backward in coming forward," and on this occasion he acted according to his usual custom.

With a shout of defiance he advanced toward the Indian warrior, running at a brisk rate.

The Blue Dog was astonished by this proceeding, for as he was within range of the white man's fire, it was his anticipation that the pale-face would endeavor to lay him low with a rifle-shot, since he had disposed of his companion in that manner.

But there was a deal of method in this seeming madness of the sport.

He had calculated that the moment he endeavored to draw a bead on the red-skin, the chief would seek shelter behind the body of his horse, and being thus protected it might be a difficult matter for him to hit the warrior.

It was his anticipation that the rapid advance would have a tendency to "rattle" the Sioux brave, and so give him a chance to lay him low.

The sport's conjecture was a shrewd one, for the movement did produce the result he desired.

Burning with a desire to avenge the fall of his comrade, and believing that he was not in any immediate danger, as the white man's rifle was not leveled at him, the Sioux chieftain did not seek shelter behind the body of his dead steed, but placing his left foot upon the carcass of the pony, he brought his rifle to his shoulder, then proceeded to take deliberate aim at the bold white man, who was advancing rapidly on him.

A couple of moments the red-skin hesitated, for he wanted to be certain that his bullet would go straight to the heart of the pale-face, and then he pulled the trigger.

Blake had calculated so closely in regard to the time that the Sioux warrior would dwell on his aim, that just as the red chief pulled the trigger, he pretended to catch his foot in a clump of grass, and down he went, sprawling flat upon the ground.

And so it happened that the bullet of the Sioux brave whistled harmlessly over his head.

The red chieftain fell into the trap!

Believing from the clumsy way in which the white man had apparently come down, that he was greatly discommoded by the fall, the Blue Dog sprang over the body of the horse, and taking a fresh aim, prepared to shoot the sport as he rose to his feet.

But hardly had the red warrior assumed his position when the rifle of the sport was at his shoulder, and a pull at the trigger sent the leaden ball on its death-dealing mission.

This was a trick which the Indian had never seen practiced, and he was taken completely by surprise, for he had no idea that it was possible for a man to take accurate aim when lying flat on the ground on his stomach.

Too late the suspicion came to him that he had been tricked, and when the white puff of smoke came from the muzzle of the sport's rifle, followed by the sharp crack of the report, the red-skin jumped back and endeavored to find safety behind the body of the horse.

But though the long-necked wild fowl, the

crazy loon, may be expert enough to dodge the swiftly moving rifle ball, warned by the curl of smoke that death is near, yet a human seldom succeeds, and in this instance the only result of the chief's movement was that the leaden messenger aimed at his chest struck him in the throat, bringing him to the earth writhing in the agonies of death.

The fight was ended, and the Fresh of 'Frisco was again a conqueror.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL.

THE Fresh or 'Frisco rose slowly to his feet, dropped the butt of his rifle to the ground, and gazed in a thoughtful way around him.

"Well, I reckon this little affair is ended," he observed.

"If I haven't made any mistake about the matter, both of these warriors have taken their departure for the Happy Hunting-Grounds, and the places which once knew them will know them no longer.

"But I reckon I had better make an examination, so as to be sure that the red-skins are done for," the sport added.

And this he proceeded to do.

His judgment was correct: both of the warriors were dead, as he had expected.

"This is a bad beginning for the Indians," the Fresh soliloquized. "And I reckon that when the red bucks discover these two bodies, they will come to the conclusion that the Great Spirit who rules the fate of war is frowning upon them in an extremely unpleasant manner.

"If it will have the effect of working so strongly upon their superstitious natures as to prevent them from embarking in this war which they contemplate, it will be one of the best things for the Sioux nation at large that ever happened, and I should not be surprised too if it produced that effect."

While indulging in these meditations the sport had allowed his eyes to rest in a thoughtful way on the countenance of the Spotted Calf, by whose body he was standing, then, happening to glance around, he caught sight of a horseman advancing rapidly across the distant prairie swells.

He recognized the rider upon the instant.

It was the old mountain-man, Rattlesnake Smith.

Leaning upon his rifle the Fresh waited until the scout came within hailing distance and then exclaimed:

"You are a little late! If you had made your appearance about ten minutes ago you would have had a chance to enjoy a little fun."

"So I perceive," the Red Rattlesnake replied as he drew rein by the side of the sport, much to the disgust of his horse which manifested the decided aversion to the dead body which such animals usually exhibit.

"The Spotted Calf, eh?" the old scout continued as he looked upon the face of the stricken warrior.

"I don't really know," the sport replied. "You see the fact is, neither of the two took the trouble to introduce himself to me."

"They were in ambush, waiting for my coming, as they knew I was riding this way, but as I was lucky enough to detect where they were hiding they did not get the opportunity to lay me out without giving me a chance for my life."

"I fixed the matter so they had to come out and fight me on a fair field, but though they undoubtedly thought that as they were two to one they had a sure thing, yet I managed to lay them out, as you see."

The old scout surveyed the sport earnestly for a moment and then he shook his head.

"Stranger, I don't know much of anything 'bout you, seeing that you are new to these parts, but this I will say that no matter who you are or what you come from there is no mistaking the fact that you are a fighter from 'way back!" the Red Rattlesnake declared.

"I am very much obliged to you indeed for the compliment," the sport replied with a polite bow.

"The more so because I reckon that you are a man who is an extra good judge in that line."

"Wa-al, I reckon I ought to be," the old scout remarked.

"These hyer two chiefs, Spotted Calf an' Blue Dog, although young warriors, hev the name of being two of the best braves in the Musselshell Sioux tribe."

"I know 'em both—hev known 'em for years, an' I kin tell you that a pair of uglier red devils never wore a moccasin, an' when it comes to war the two were counted to be as great braves as kin be scared up in the Injun country, so you kin see that it is a mighty big feather in your cap to be able to lay out the pair."

"And yet I was not put to much trouble to accomplish the feat," the sport observed.

"A single shot apiece did the business," he added.

"Yes, I heered the cracks, but I never reckoned thar was any war going on, for I thought it was some of the red bucks arter game."

"That is true enough, but it was human game they sought."

"But I say, w'ot on airth ar' you a-doing up

in this section, anyway?" the old mountain-man asked, abruptly.

"Oh, I have had quite a little adventure, for the reds captured me on the trail as you anticipated."

"Sho! you don't tell me?"

"Yes, it is a sure enough fact," Blake replied. And then the sport related all that had occurred from the time he parted with the Red Rattlesnake by the bank of the Musselshell River up to the present moment, and as he judged that the knowledge of how the Indians felt in regard to making war upon the whites would be of service to the scout he was particular to explain the matter in full, only suppressing the name of his informant.

"Wa-al, wa-al! if this don't jest take the rag right off the bush!" the Red Rattlesnake exclaimed.

"And you managed to upset the apple-cart too!" he continued. "And now this little fight will be mighty apt to make the red imps think—when it comes to their knowledge—that if they do go into this war they will not stand any show to win."

"It was my calculation that it ought to work that way."

"I noticed that you kept quiet 'bout who it was that put you onto this thing, but I know enuff 'bout these hyer Musselshell Sioux to guess right away as to the party," the old scout remarked, shrewdly.

"It was the White Squaw," the Red Rattlesnake continued. "She is a good gal—mighty good! is as honest as the day, an' the red-skins would get along a heap sight better if they would only allow themselves to be guided by her advice, an' wouldn't pay any attention to the ravings of these young bucks, the most of whom hav'n't got sense enough to go in when it rains."

"Well, from the way things are going I reckon the reds will be rather dubious about going to war," the Fresh declared.

"The thrashing of their big chief was considerable of a set-back to them, and when they discover that these two braves, who set out so confidently to take my scalp, have passed in their checks they will be apt to think that luck is running dead against them."

"Yes, it ought to work that way," the old scout coincided.

"There is another thing to be considered too," the Red Rattlesnake added. "Kurnel Poindexter, who is in command of this district, is an extra good man; most people are inclined to consider him rough and overbearing, an' thar ain't the least mite of doubt that he is kinder hasty an' high-strung at times, but when it comes down to war he knows his business from A to Ampersand, an' in a case of this kind he is sart'in to act promptly."

"That is always the wisest course," Blake observed. "I have considerable knowledge of these red-skins, and therefore understand that the man who wishes to strike terror to their souls must act promptly, and when blows are dealt they must be severe ones; no half-way measures will answer."

"You are right, by hookey!" the old mountain-man declared.

"Wa-al, in this hyer case the kurnel, as soon as he got wind that the reds were inclined to cut up rusty, started me off to warn the next post."

"It was the kurnel's calculations, you see, that the red bucks would make a break for the hills jest as soon as they made up their minds to be ugly, an' sure enuff, that is jest what they did do."

"Yes, they have selected a very strong position, and if they show fight it will not be an easy matter to get at them."

"I reckon I know the spot," and then the old mountain-man gave an exact description of the valley where the Indians had taken refuge.

"That is the place," Blake remarked.

"When I heered that they had broke away I reckoned they would make for that ar' valley, an' I told the kurnel so; he had faith enuff in my judgment to believe I knew w'ot I was talkin' 'bout, an' went in to make his preparations to git the reds into a trap."

"Ah, yes, I see; it is his idea to stop the war by getting the Indians in such a position that they will see it would be madness for them to fight."

"That is the scheme, an' I reckon it is going to work all right too," the Red Rattlesnake declared.

"I know all 'bout this hyer valley whar the red imps are located as well as any copper-colored buck in the deestrick, an' thar ain't no mistake 'bout its being a mighty good place for a skirmish, but in a sart'in way this hyer valley is a good deal like a rat-trap, an' if sart'in arrangements are made the red heathens will be mighty apt to find themselves in a tight place."

"Yes, I think I understand the game," the sport remarked, thoughtfully.

"I should think from what I saw of the valley that there are only two ways of either getting into or out of it," Blake added.

"You hev bit it plum center!" the old mountain-man exclaimed.

"Thar ain't but two ways for humans, though a mountain goat might be able to climb up the rocks on the sides.

"Now then, the kurnel has fixed up the nicest kind of a plan," the Red Rattlesnake continued.

"Major Ben Canteen from the lower fort on the Musselshell has made a forced march with four companies, an' got round to the north of the valley, an' as he has got a couple of light guns with him, an' is, too, one of the old Injun-fighters who has stood up ag'in' these bucks so many times that he has got all tha'r tricks down as fine as kin be, the odds ar' big that if the Sioux ar' pushed from the lower end of the valley that they won't be able to skip out on the upper trail in a hurry."

"Yes, I fancied I understood how the game would be worked when you began to explain the matter," Blake declared.

"With the colonel at the lower end of the valley, and the major at the upper the red-skins will be caught between two fires."

"Exactly! and as both detachments have light guns the shells will be apt to make things interesting to the red-skins!" the old scout remarked, with a grin.

"Yes, and shells they don't like."

"Thar comes the kurnel now!" the Red Rattlesnake exclaimed, abruptly.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE COLONEL.

THE old mountain-man was correct in his statement.

About half a mile off the head of a column of mounted troops could plainly be discerned.

"Now, then, sport, if you are game for a leetle more fun, I kin introduce you to the kurnel, an' I reckon he will be glad to hev you go along," the old scout remarked.

"All right! I am agreeable," the Fresh responded.

"Since I have got mixed up in this thing, I suppose I may as well see the matter through," he added.

"Yas, that is w'ot I thought."

"I'll get my mule, so as to be all ready for a start," Blake remarked. "When I saw that I was in for a fight, I corraled the beast in yonder clump of evergreens, back of the big rock, for I knew the reds would go for the animal at the first break, with the idea of cutting off my escape."

"Oh, yes; that is the game that they allers try to play," the Red Rattlesnake affirmed. "But this hyer thing must have been a dreadful surprise party to them, for it is sart'in that they did not know you were loaded fer b'ar when they went in to lay you out."

"The best and wisest of men will make little mistakes of that kind once in a while," the sport replied with the air of a philosopher.

Then he proceeded to his mule, mounted the beast and rode to the side of the mountain-man.

By this time the troopers had approached so near that a good view of them could be had.

At the head of the column rode a man who was the perfect picture of a veteran soldier.

In person he was a little above the medium height, well-built and decidedly muscular, with regular, yet strongly marked features, such as would have attracted attention anywhere, and any good judge of human nature would have set the owner of the face down for being a remarkable man, and any one who had ever met the gentleman would not be apt to forget him, for his face was certainly a striking one.

Sun and wind had bronzed his complexion until he was almost as dark as an Indian; then, strange contrast! his tightly cropped hair, as well as the long curling mustache and Frenchified imperial which adorned his lip and chin, were as white as the driven snow, and these set off by his ruddy complexion gave him a most peculiar look.

This was Colonel Jefferson Poindexter, who bore the reputation of being as able an officer as Uncle Sam could boast.

The eagle eyes of the colonel detected the dead Indians from afar, and so he halted the column a good thousand feet off and rode forward, accompanied by his senior captain, Mortimer McNab, a red-headed, red-whiskered son of the "land of cakes," bonny Scotland.

"Well, well, Smith, it looks to me as if you had had some warm work here," the colonel remarked as he rode up.

"Spotted Calf and Blue Dog, eh? two rascals who have done more to make trouble between the Indians and the whites than any other warriors in the tribe, with the exception of the chief in person, that scoundrel, Laughing Horse."

"Wa-al, kurnel, I reckon they won't never kick up any more disturbances, leastways not in this world, anyway," the old mountain-man observed.

"As I am not acting as Indian police in' the other world at present, it does not matter to me what they do there," the officer remarked in a dry way.

"That is so," Rattlesnake Smith asserted. "And it is a dead sure thing that you won't have no more bother with 'em in this."

"How did it happen that they went for you?" the colonel inquired.

"I am rather surprised that the bucks should try a move of that kind, for there are mighty few of the red-skins that are willing to run up against you," the officer added.

"That is a sure enuff fact, I reckon," the old scout admitted, with a grin.

"But this time you are barking up the wrong tree, kurnel," he continued. "I ain't the man w'ot give these two reds thar ticket for soup, but this hyer stranger," and Rattlesnake Smith nodded to Blake.

Colonel Poindexter elevated his eyebrows in a peculiar way, an indication that he was surprised by the statement, and then he closely examined the Fresh of 'Frisco from head to heel, a scrutiny which Blake bore with perfect composure.

"I don't think that I have ever had the pleasure of meeting you before, sir," the military man remarked in the stately way so natural to him. "But I have no hesitation in saying that it is my opinion that you must be an extra good man, or else you could never have succeeded in settling these two warriors, who bear a reputation as braves second to none in their tribe."

"Oh, I suppose they were good men enough," Blake replied, carelessly. "Yet I did not have any particular trouble in disposing of them; still there isn't anything wonderful about the matter, for I claim to be a first-class man, and it is my belief that even two first-class Indians are not a match for a first-class white man."

"This may seem a little like boasting on my part, colonel," the sport hastened to add. "But I don't want my words to be taken in that way. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, you know, and in this case, if any man thinks I am boasting, I can point to my game as proof that my statement is not overdrawn."

"Your position is undoubtedly correct," the colonel affirmed. "The Indian is not the equal of the white man as a warrior, as has been amply proved on a thousand different occasions, and the men who insist that he is do not know what they are talking about."

"How may I call your name?" asked the colonel, abruptly.

"Jackson Blake."

"And from the style of your dress I should fancy that you are a speculator," the officer remarked, with a quiet smile.

"Yes, you have hit it. I am a speculator in pasteboards and ivory," Blake replied. "And men who have tried my metal in that line usually come to the opinion that I am well-posted in regard to my business."

"So I should fancy from your appearance, and on some future occasion, when the opportunity serves, I shall be pleased to experiment with you in the short-card line so as to discover just how great a chief you are."

"I shall be glad to meet you, of course," the sport remarked, with a polite bow. "I was on my way to Hardtack City when these red-skins gathered me in, having heard that the district was enjoying the biggest kind of a boom, and so I thought it would be a good place for me to locate."

"If you remember, kurnel, I told you 'bout meeting this hyer stranger on the trail," the old mountain-man remarked at this point. "And how I reckoned the red bucks would be apt to go for him."

"Yes, yes, I recollect," the colonel said.

"An' they did gobble him, too, but from the way the thing turned out it was 'bout the worst bit of business that they could have done," Rattlesnake Smith declared. And then he detailed the sport's adventures in the Indian encampment.

The officers listened with the utmost attention, and it was plain from the look upon their faces that they were greatly amazed.

When the recital ended the colonel spoke.

"Well, upon my word, I must say that this sounds more like a romance than reality," he exclaimed.

"It is the truth, though, as you can ascertain when you open communications with the red-skins," Blake observed.

"Oh, I haven't any doubt in regard to the matter," Colonel Poindexter replied.

"The bodies of these two braves are visible evidence that you are an extra good man," he continued. "And from what I know of the Laughing Horse, I am not at all surprised that you should be able to thrash him when it came to a boxing bout."

"He needed a lesson, and I am very glad that you were able to give him one."

"Yes, and I think it will be a long time before he will be anxious to encounter another white man in that manner," the sport observed.

"I should not be surprised if your victory has an important influence," the officer remarked, in a meditative way.

"These red-men are the slaves of superstition, and your easy defeat of the chief, coupled with the fact that the old medicine-man predicted that the contest would have an important bearing on the war, will be pretty certain to make the bucks dubious about going in to wipe out the white men."

"And then the death of these braves, too, will be apt to have a depressing influence upon the spirits of the Sioux," the colonel added.

"Yes, undoubtedly, and when they find out that I am the man who did the job, they will be apt to think that I am the biggest kind of a warrior," Blake observed.

"I suppose that it is quite likely, too, that some of the relatives, or friends, of the braves may feel like taking the matter up when the reds find out that I am responsible for the death of the two men," the sport suggested.

"Very likely," said Colonel Poindexter.

"Still, if you choose to keep the matter secret, the truth need not get out."

"That's so!" the old mountain-man exclaimed.

"Only us four hyer know anything 'bout the matter, an' all we hev got to do is to hold our tongues, and no one will be able to tell who salivated the bucks."

"Well, although I am very much obliged to you, gentlemen, for your kindness in suggesting this course, yet I am obliged to say that it is one that I can not carry out," the Fresh observed.

"I am a very plain, straightforward sort of fellow, one of the kind that believes in standing up to the rack and taking the responsibility every time," Blake explained.

"Then, too, in my judgment there is not the least use of a man trying to get out of an affair of this kind."

"Although there wasn't any witnesses to this fight, and only you three know that I killed the braves, yet, in my opinion, the truth is as certain to leak out as that we are standing here living men, so, in time, I am certain to be called to an account."

"I believe you are right," the colonel remarked, in a thoughtful way. "It is a remarkable fact, but it is a hard matter to keep an affair of this kind quiet. The very birds seem to carry the news."

"Exactly! that is just what I think," the sport declared. "And then it follows that the bold and open course is the best. The man who in a matter of this kind boldly takes the bull by the horns, seldom loses anything by so doing."

"Correct! It is my experience that the bold player generally stands a much better chance to win than the man who is afraid of his game," Colonel Poindexter remarked.

"That is my ideal! That is the rule I always work on, and I propose to go ahead on that line now, so with your permission I will accompany you to the Indian village, and when I get speech with the red-men I shall say to them, 'You made an agreement with me that if I whipped your chief, Laughing Horse, I should be permitted to go free. I did the job, as you all know, and you allowed me to go, according to the compact, but two of your young men lay in wait for me, anxious for revenge, and in defiance of the solemn agreement made, attempted to kill me; but they were not as great warriors as they considered themselves to be, and so I wiped them out.'"

"Now then, warriors of the Sioux nation, I come to tell you that your two braves, Spotted Calf and Blue Dog, were a couple of cowardly bounds, whom I slew for their treachery, and if there is any brave in the tribe who desires to avenge the death of these two curs, let him step forward and meet me in single fight."

"That is the lay-out that I intend to give them, fair, open and above-board, and if there isn't any warriors in the village bold enough to take up the defiance I reckon it will be the last of the thing."

All three of the hearers nodded in approval when the sport concluded his speech.

"You have come to a correct decision in my opinion," Colonel Poindexter remarked.

"Oh, yes, the reds must come up to the rack or admit that their men are no good!" the Scotchman declared.

"The argument is a mighty sound one, but I am betting a big stack of dollars that ther bluff will go, an' nary red buck will dare to take the thing up!" the old scout exclaimed.

"I should not be surprised if it worked that way," the colonel said. "And I assure you, Blake, that you are quite welcome to go along with us and make the trial."

The sport responded in suitable terms and a few minutes later the column was again on its way.

CHAPTER XX.

THE TALK.

THANKS to the nature of the ground, and the excellent watch kept by the Indian sentinels, the advancing troops were discovered before they had got within a couple of miles of the Sioux stronghold.

The news was at once sent to the village and the Indians swarmed like a lot of bees to the outposts, eager to gaze upon the white foe.

Some of the young braves talked war in the most valorous manner, but the great majority of the chiefs, particularly the old ones, shook their heads and counseled peace.

They pointed out that the white braves had come in force, and they pointed also to the "big

guns," the Indian's particular dread, which were in the center of the troopers.

These light pieces, mountain howitzers, the red-men had learned to respect, and a single shell screeching through the air as it winged its rapid flight seemed to them like a veritable demon bent on blood and destruction, striking more terror to their souls than a regiment of soldiers.

And then there was another thing which operated to discourage the war-party.

"It was an open secret in the village that the Spotted Calf and the Blue Dog had gone forth on a mission of vengeance, their intention being to kill the bold white chief who had defeated the great warrior of the tribe.

The pair had told some of their companions of what they intended to do and these braves let out the secret.

The warriors had not returned, and some of the old men shook their heads in a doubtful way while they expressed the hope that the white man's medicine had not proven too much for them.

The soldiers came steadily on, and great was the disgust of the Indians when they distinguished the Fresh of Frisco, riding in advance of the column in company with Colonel Poindexter.

The braves had not succeeded in their undertaking, and then the red-skins caught sight of a rude litter carried by the troopers upon which bodies, seemingly, were placed, and though from the fact that the soldiers were in the way so that a good view could not be obtained, yet the keenest-eyed red-skins were of the opinion that the bodies on the litter were not those of white men.

A horrid suspicion took possession of the Indians; the two braves had encountered the strange white chief only to be killed by him.

The soldiers were now within a mile of the outposts and if the Sioux intended to make an effort to prevent them from coming up into the valley it was time they set to work, but as the warriors differed in regard to this matter a wrangle ensued, and while the Indians were disputing a messenger arrived from the upper end of the valley with the intelligence that a strong body of soldiers, armed too with some big guns, had taken possession of the upper passes.

The consternation of the Sioux was great.

"We are in a trap and it is utter folly for the red chiefs to talk of resistance!" the old medicine-man declared.

And in the face of this new discovery not even the bragging young warriors dared to advocate war.

The knowledge that if they attempted to fight the colonel's detachment and got the worst of the struggle that their escape through the upper passes was impossible, removed all the longing for war.

"I will see the great white chief and ask him why he comes with the big guns up into the Sioux land!" Nish-ma-wah declared.

The rest thought that this was a good idea, for though the red warriors outnumbered the white soldiers three to one, yet they had no desire to try conclusion with them.

They feared the big guns and they dreaded the big white chief, Colonel Poindexter, Long Whitehead, as the red-skins had named him.

They had tried the colonel's valor and skill on some well-fought fields, and they did not want to stand up against him in battle array unless they had everything in their favor, and on the present occasion things were very decidedly not in that condition.

By the time that the Sioux had come to this conclusion the troops had advanced until they were just within rifle-range, and then in obedience to an order from Colonel Poindexter the command prepared for action.

The soldiers formed into line, dismounting as they did so and sending their horses to the rear, the howitzers were wheeled to the front and the gunners got in position.

Then as soon as these preparations were completed there wasn't one of the Indians on the heights who did not have a firm conviction that Colonel Poindexter meant business.

At this point the old medicine-man started down the hill, elevating his hands, giving the Indian sign of peace as he advanced.

Colonel Poindexter with the old mountain-man, Rattlesnake Smith, Jackson Blake, and half a dozen officers formed a group as the old medicine-man advanced.

"They want a talk," the colonel observed. "I had an idea that this display would be apt to bring them to their milk."

"The red-skins don't like shells for a cent, and when the big guns begin to get in their fine work the average Indian comes to the conclusion that it is time he is among the missing."

"I reckon that thar ain't going to be much trouble," the Red Rattlesnake remarked. "For it is the old Ground Hog who is coming, an' he is just as square as any red-man that kin be scared up anywhere."

"Yes, Nish-ma-wah is a good man and has always done his best to preserve peace," the colonel declared.

"Quite a different sort of fellow from the majority of these medicine-men, who are a set of ignorant bigots with just enough low cunning to fool the red-men, and they usually strive to stir up strife, thinking to enhance their own importance," the soldier declared in conclusion.

"But the Ground Hog is a long-headed old fellow and he knows that as the Injun is the weaker vessel the more he bucks up ag'in' the whites the worse off he is," the old mountain-man remarked, shrewdly.

The old medicine-man advanced until he reached the group in the center of which stood Colonel Poindexter.

"The great white chief is welcome to the land of the Mussalshell Sioux," the Ground Hog remarked with a great deal of dignity. "But why does he come with all his young men and the big guns as though he meant war?"

"You know well enough why I came, Nish-ma-wah, so what is the use of beating around the bush?" Colonel Poindexter asked.

"And since we have begun with questions let me put one to you," the soldier continued.

"Why have the Sioux left their lands in the valley and fled up into the mountains?"

"Why have your young men put on the war-paint and made captives of whites who were peacefully proceeding about their business?"

"It is the work of the Laughing Horse," the old medicine-man replied. "You captured two of his young warriors, and as word was brought to him that you intended to hang them he seized upon the pale-faces so as to be able to retaliate."

"I supposed that was his little game," the soldier rejoined. "But he was misinformed. The fellows I laid by the heels were a couple of horse-thieves, and the Great Father at Washington does not hang men for stealing horses, although these Western Judge Lynch fellows do if they are lucky enough to get their hands on the rascals."

"But the chief need not worry about his young men," the colonel continued. "I thought I had the rascals safe and sound; but though they were carefully searched, and their weapons taken away from them, yet one of the fellows managed to conceal a knife, and during the night the pair succeeded in digging their way out of the guard-house where they had been placed."

"The braves have escaped, then?" the old medicine-man remarked, in a thoughtful way.

"Yes, they gave leg-bail, so no longer are factors in this affair; therefore, your people have no excuse now for retaining the whites whom they have captured," the colonel remarked.

"You understand I am putting this matter in this way so as to let you down easy—to give your chief a chance to release the captives without apparently being forced to do so," the officer added.

"Yes, I comprehend, and your action shows that you are as wise in council as you are brave in the battle-field," the Ground Hog declared.

"You are pleased to be complimentary," Colonel Poindexter observed, with a grim smile.

"Of course you know that I have come for the white prisoners, and that I am going to have them, either by fair means or foul. If your people are willing to yield them peaceably, well and good. In my opinion they will be wise not to make any trouble about the matter, but if they are inclined to be obstinate I shall be under the necessity of making an attack upon them which will go far to wiping out this branch of the Sioux tribe."

"You understand that I mean business," the officer continued, with stern determination.

"Your chief, the Laughing Horse, and some of the young warriors, have been insolent lately, and it is about time they were made to comprehend that when it comes to war, they do not stand any chance against the white men."

"The captives must be released, and your people must return to their former location."

"If you have been unjustly treated, I will do my best to see that the wrong is righted."

"You know me, and know, too, that what I say can be depended upon."

"Yes, that is the truth," the old medicine-man admitted.

"The great white chief always speaks with a straight tongue."

"Yes, that is the kind of man I am!" the colonel responded with stately pride.

"And you must understand too, Nish-ma-wah, that this is no idle threat that I have made," the soldier declared.

"I am not the kind of man to waste time in empty vaporings."

"Your chief probably thought he was playing a particularly smart trick when he moved his village up into this rocky region; he undoubtedly imagined that he was taking a position where it would not be easy for me to get at him, and at the first glance it would appear as if it was so, but if you look into the matter closely you will see that the Laughing Horse has really got you all into a trap."

"This retreat of yours can only be reached by two trails. I command the lower one, and Major Canteen, with a large force, has occupied the upper pass, and when I open fire here it will be the signal for him to advance, so between the

two of us I fancy your people stand a chance of being pretty well used up."

"The great white chief knows that the voice of Nish-ma-wah has always been for peace," the old medicine-man replied. "It is the young braves who have no sense that cry for war."

"Yes, and those are just the fellows that I would like to handle for a while!" the colonel declared. "But the trouble is that these rash young bloods drag good men in with them, and so the innocent suffer with the guilty."

"There will be no war this time," the old medicine-man declared. "The Laughing Horse will not be able to raise his voice in the council-lodge for some time, and the war-party without their leader is harmless."

"I am glad to hear it," Colonel Poindexter replied. "Although war is my trade yet I am averse to shedding blood, particularly when it can be avoided just as well as not. I am acquainted with all the facts regarding the Laughing Horse's retirement from active service, and know how much this gentleman here"—and he nodded toward Blake—"contributed toward bringing about that result, and I can tell you, Nish-ma-wah, that it was a mighty unlucky day for your tribe when your warriors jumped on this white chief, for not only the defeat of the Laughing Horse, but the deaths of two braves, Spotted Calf and Blue Dog, lie also at his door."

Then Colonel Poindexter directed that the litter containing the two bodies should be brought forward for the inspection of the old Indian.

Nish-ma-wah surveyed the dead men without betraying any particular emotion, although the colonel fancied he discovered a gleam in his eyes which seemed to indicate satisfaction rather than regret.

Poindexter knew that the two warriors had been fast friends of the Laughing Horse, and he suspected that as the young chief and the old medicine-man did not get on very well together, it was probable that he was not on good terms with the braves.

This was the truth. There was bad blood between Nish-ma-wah and the two young chiefs, and therefore he felt no sorrow on account of their death.

The Fresh of Frisco felt that it was now time for him to say something, and so he made his declaration in regard to his willingness to afford satisfaction to any friends of the slain warriors.

The old medicine-man shook his head.

"The Sioux warriors are not fools to rush to certain death," he replied. "Already have the Sioux people beheld the strange white chief handle their best brave as though he was a child, and when they learn that he, alone and unaided, has caused two renowned braves like the Spotted Calf and the Blue Dog to bite the dust, the Sioux warrior must be mad indeed to want to meet him in battle array."

"That, of course, is a point which each man must settle for himself," the sport replied. "If none of the Sioux warriors are willing to face me, that ends the matter."

"I come forward like an honest man and admit that both of the braves fell by my hand, and declare that I am ready to give satisfaction; more I can not say."

"There may be some fool among the Sioux warriors who will be mad enough to meet you, but I do not think there is," Nish-ma-wah remarked.

"But I will deliver your message and also yours, great white chief," and he made a grave inclination of his head toward the colonel.

"Very well, I will give you ample time to talk the matter over," the officer said. "And if your people are wise they will not bring about their complete ruin by attempting to resist."

"The Sioux warriors will be certain to yield obedience to the demands of the great white-headed chief," the old man declared. "I feel sure of it."

"The Laughing Horse is sick and sore in his wigwam, Spotted Calf and Blue Dog have gone to the spirit-land, and these three were the leaders of the war-party; now that their voices are silent the hearts of the Sioux will turn toward peace."

"Well, I hope so," Colonel Poindexter remarked. "I am not anxious to wipe out your tribe, for I feel convinced that if the braves decide upon war no other result can be reached. Shall I send some of my men to carry the bodies?"

The old medicine-man assented to this, and as soon as the soldiers were detailed led the way to the Indian outpost.

When this was reached the soldiers laid down their burden and returned down the hill.

The savages crowded around the litter and with solemn faces looked upon the dead warriors.

Then the old medicine-man told the story of how they had been slain and delivered the challenge of the Fresh of Frisco.

The Indians looked at each other in wonder. What kind of a man was this strange white chief who thus boldly dared to hurl defiance in the teeth of all the Sioux nation?

But as the Ground Hog had expected, none of the warriors appeared to be willing to accept the challenge.

They had already seen enough of the white man to lead them to believe that his "medicine" was extraordinarily good, and no one of the red warriors was anxious to secure a quick dispatch to the Happy Hunting-Grounds by accepting the defiance of the sport to single fight.

Finding that no one was willing to encounter the white chief, Nish-ma-wah proceeded to deliver the colonel's message.

By this time the war-fever had materially abated.

The Indians had sense enough to see that the white-skinned had decidedly the best of the situation, and none of them were anxious to bring on a fight with the chances against them.

The red-skinned did not like the idea of giving up their captives, but, as under the circumstances it was not possible for them to retain them, they concluded to make a virtue of necessity and yield them with a good grace.

The Indians too felt more resigned to this course on account of the escape of the two young horse-stealing braves.

If the pair had been still in the colonel's hands the Sioux would not have been so willing to give up their captives.

A grand "talk" was held and the subject debated at length.

As the old medicine-man had shrewdly calculated the absence of the Laughing Horse and his two chums weakened the war-party so that they did not make much of a figure in the council, and the chiefs who were for peace had everything their own way.

Within a brief half an hour the council arrived at a decision.

The prisoners were brought forward, given in charge of Nish-ma-wah and down the hill he proceeded with them, to the intense satisfaction of the old lawyer and Miss Vanderhoven, who were delighted to get out of the clutches of the red-skinned.

After delivering the prisoners to the colonel, the old medicine-man announced that the Sioux had decided to comply with all the soldier's demands.

"Already they are preparing for the march to return to their former dwelling-place," the Ground Hog said in conclusion.

Colonel Poindexter expressed his satisfaction that the red-men were inclined to listen to reason.

Two hours later the Indians were on the move, escorted by the troops.

The Indian war scare was over and the Fresh of Frisco had much to do with bringing about this happy result.

CHAPTER XXI.

ON THE ROAD.

COLONEL POINDEXTER, despite the fact that he was an old bachelor, well along in years, with a head silvered by the frost of many winters, was a great ladies' man and therefore was very much impressed by the charms of Miss Arabella, and after the details of the march were arranged he took care to provide good ponies for the use of the lady and her escort, the old lawyer.

The civilians rode on in advance of the troopers, and the Indians brought up the rear.

After the party were well under way Mr. De Witt drew a long breath, indicative of great relief.

"Thank Heaven that we are well out of that terrible predicament!" he exclaimed.

"How extremely lucky that the troops came as they did," he continued. "If it had not been for the fortunate circumstance it might have gone hard with us."

"Oh, I reckon that you wasn't in much danger," the old mountain-man observed in a rather curt manner.

He rode on the right of the old lawyer, while Miss Vanderhoven was on De Witt's left, and next to her came Jackson Blake.

Rattlesnake Smith had the usual contempt that the old Western rustlers generally exhibit toward Eastern strangers, tenderfeet, as they are commonly called.

"Ah, my dear sir, I do not feel at all sure in regard to that!" the old lawyer exclaimed.

"Of course I do not pretend to be much of a judge in regard to such matters, but from the little I have seen of these savages I am satisfied that the greater part of them would take a great deal of pleasure in putting a helpless white man to the torture."

"Oh, yes, you are right enuff 'bout that, I will allow," the old scout replied.

"I ain't a-standing up for the red imps; and although I know that thar ar' some good men among 'em I will hev to gi'n in that the big majority ar' as ugly devils as kin be scared up above ground."

"Then we certainly must have been in great danger," the old lawyer argued.

"Not so much as you think, for with all thar ugliness the reds have a big sight of good, hard, hoss sense, an' they know that if they damaged you the kurnel would be sart'in to hold 'em to a mighty strict account."

"Tain't like, you must understand, as though they had run across you on the prairie, when they was on the war-path and were all ready to go for a white-skin on sight."

"In such a case as that, now, the red bucks might have been inclined to take your scalps without any bit of ceremony."

"Ugh!" exclaimed the old gentleman with a shiver, "the very thought of such a thing makes me have a chill."

"Ah, I can never be too thankful to Colonel Poindexter for getting us out of our unfortunate situation," Mr. De Witt added.

"Thar's a party over yonder that had a deal to do with pulling you out of the scrape," the old scout declared, with a back-hand jerk of his thumb toward the sport.

"If he hadn't jest warmed the big Sioux chief, Laughing Horse, right out of his boots, an' then laid out two of his pards, I don't reckon that the kurnel—although he is as good a man to handle the Injuns as ever struck this country—would have been able to settle the matter so easily."

"The statement is correct," Miss Vanderhoven remarked. "This gentleman contributed materially to our release," then she bowed to the Fresh of Frisco, favoring him with an extremely sweet smile.

"Don't mention it!" Blake exclaimed with a polite bow to the lady.

"Through the kindness of that strange Indian girl, whom they call the White Squaw, I was enabled to see your contest with the chief, Mr. Blake, and right from the beginning I saw that he did not stand any chance with you."

And then with a little laugh she continued:

"You see I am quite a judge in such matters. I used to go with my cousin, Jack, to his club—he was a member of one of the leading athletic clubs in New York—and although I know that very few young ladies take an interest in boxing matches, yet I will have to admit that I did, and I always made it a point to be present when boxing receptions were given."

"You are posted then of course," Blake remarked.

"Yes, and I can assure you that when you get the best of that red ruffian so cleverly, I had hard work to restrain myself from giving a good old New York cheer, just as the boys do in the city, you know."

Just at this point the colonel rode up.

"We will not make particularly good time, with all this raft to look after," he said. "And the thought just came to me that there really isn't any need of you people waiting for us, as I suppose you are in a hurry to get to your destination."

"I can spare Smith here for a guide, just as well as not, and you can go ahead as fast as you please."

"I am very much obliged to you for your kindness and consideration," Miss Vanderhoven said, for as the colonel addressed the remark more particularly to her than to the others, she took it upon herself to reply.

"Don't mention it, I beg!" the old soldier exclaimed, with an extremely gallant bow. "I shall be happy to call upon you after you arrive in Hardtack City, and if I can be of any service to you, I trust that you will not hesitate to command me."

The lady replied in suitable terms, then the colonel made another elaborate bow, and rode back to the troopers.

"I'm glad the kurnel thought of this hyer thing!" the old scout exclaimed. "'Cos it will be mighty tiresome to putter along this way."

"I presume there will not be any danger to be encountered," the old lawyer observed, with a regretful glance over his shoulder at the troops.

"Not a mite!" Rattlesnake Smith replied. "Sides, if we should happen to run into a war-party of twenty or thirty bucks, it will be jest old pie for Mr. Blake hyer, an' a feller 'bout my size to lay 'em out!"

And this speech was delivered with such a grave air that for a moment the old gentleman was alarmed, then Miss Vanderhoven laughed outright, and Mr. De Witt perceived that the old mountain-man was disposed to have some fun at his expense, so he made a wry face.

"Well, well, although I have the greatest amount of faith in the fighting abilities of you two gentlemen, yet I must admit that at the present time, as I am a man of peace, I had rather the red-skinned would keep away."

"I think I have had sufficient of the noble red-man already to last me for the rest of my days, and I would wish to be placed upon record as being of the opinion that a little Indian goes a long ways."

This statement provoked a general laugh.

The party gave rein to the horses, and in a short time left the rest far behind.

As the old mountain-man was well acquainted with the country, it was an easy task for him to conduct the party to the mining-camp, which they reached late in the afternoon.

The town of Hardtack was just about the same as the usual settlements which spring up in the neighborhood of mining discoveries.

There was but a single street, where the business houses were situated—as customary, there were more saloons than anything else—and the

miners had their cabins on the outskirts of the town.

The principal saloon was called the Pink Palace, on account of its color, as the enterprising proprietor, Doc Slater, the leading sport of the town, determined, when he set up his "shebang"—as he usually termed it in his humorous, playful way—to outshine any other resort in the camp, so he sent for paint and gave the building a coat.

As it happened, a bright pink was all the color he could get, but the veteran sport was well satisfied with the hue, particularly as it gave him a chance to apply a novel name to his establishment, and really, when the painting was completed, the building presented a gorgeous appearance.

It was the only house in the town that was painted, and so it stood out conspicuously above all the rest.

There were five other saloons in the camp, all of which made more or less pretensions to providing "square meals" for their patrons who were hungry as well as thirsty, but the Pink Palace was the only one that afforded sleeping accommodations, and set up any claims to being a hotel.

Women were few and far between in the mining-camp, and therefore, the arrival of a "first-class Eastern lady, a reg'lar A No. 1 female!" as one enthusiastic miner put it, excited great attention.

The veteran landlord sport, Doc Slater, received the lady with as much ceremony as though she had been an empress.

The old sport was a decided character, standing a trifle over six feet in his stockings, splendidly proportioned, with massive features fringed by long, flowing iron-gray locks, and a long beard of the same hue, he presented a decidedly patriarchal appearance, and a stranger attempting to guess the character of the man from his appearance, would have been much more apt to set him down for a prominent merchant, or banker, just the sort of man to run a Sunday-school, than an all-around sport who for years had been one of the chief captains of King Faro's hosts.

"Want to get to stop awhile with me, eh?" Doc Slater said, after the old lawyer had explained what was desired, and from the style of the host's speech, it was plain that the landlord sport was either Southwestern born, or had lived so long in that part of the country as to acquire the peculiar manner of expression common to that part of the United States.

"Yes, that is what we desire," Mr. De Witt replied.

"Well, this isn't the Fifth Avenue Hotel of New York, nor even the Southern of St. Louis, nor the St. Charles of Orleans, but I reckon I can make you comfortable for all that," Doc Slater remarked.

"Walk right in, and I will have my housekeeper fix up a room for the lady in a brace of shakes!"

Then the host conducted the pair up-stairs. On the landing stood the housekeeper, a big, brawny, middle-aged Irishwoman, who, despite her rather rough appearance, had a pleasant, honest face.

She had witnessed the lady's arrival from one of the front windows, and hastened to greet her, anxious to do the honors.

"Here's a lady for you to take care of, Mrs. O'Toole," Doc Slater explained. "And you want to do your level best to make her feel right at home."

"Faith, an' I'll do that same!" the woman declared.

"Walk right in here, miss, and you, sur, too, if you please. This is the parlor, an' you will please remain here while I am afther gettin' yer apartments ready."

CHAPTER XXII.

A DISCOVERY.

"THANK you," Miss Vanderhoven said in the dainty, agreeable way common to her, as she entered the room, the old gentleman following, while the housekeeper remained at the door.

"Don't hurry yourself on my account, I beg," the young lady continued. "I will be quite comfortable here until my room is ready for me."

"It will not be after taking me long, but, you see, miss, it isn't often that we do be havin' lodgers to stay wid us, for the most of them that do come to the camp do be afther coming wid their husbands, an' they get a cabin an' set up for themselves right away."

"Yes, I should suppose that such would be the case."

"But I will be afther seein' that you are comfortable," the woman declared, as she took her departure, and as she went through the entry she remarked to herself that it was a real pleasure to wait on a lady of this kind who though she was one of "the quality" knew how to have the "perlite word in her mouth."

The couple seated themselves and surveyed the apartment.

It was a small room and scantily furnished, the principal article being a big round table which stood in the middle of the apartment; around it were a half-dozen common wooden

chairs, while a couple more were by the windows, and these the pair had taken.

In one corner was a funny little sort of a dumb waiter which ran to the floor below.

"Well, I must say that this is about the queerest hotel parlor that I ever saw," the old gentleman remarked after he had carefully surveyed the apartment.

"I have been in a good many odd hotels in my life but this is really the oddest that I ever got into," Mr. De Witt continued.

"This is more like a dining-room than a parlor, for that table is certainly large enough to accommodate a dozen guests."

If the 'Fresh of Frisco had been present he could quickly have explained why the "parlor" was furnished in such a peculiar manner.

An apartment reserved for a parlor is a luxury that few mining-camp hotels can boast, but hardly one of these houses of entertainment is there where a poker-room can not be found, a private apartment where the men who like to play a "stiff" game, for big money, can secure the privacy which is essential to their enjoyment.

And this apartment, dubbed the parlor for the nonce, was the poker-room of the Pink Palace, and the diminutive dumb waiter ran directly to the bar beneath, so that the gamblers could procure their liquid refreshments without putting a man to the trouble of running up and down stairs.

But as the old lawyer was not posted in regard to the "customs and manners" of the wild West, the mystery of the room was too deep for him to solve.

After examining the apartment, Miss Vanderhoven looked out of the window, and no sooner did her gaze fall upon the house on the opposite side of the way than she uttered a cry of amazement.

"What is it—what is the matter?" asked the old lawyer, rising from his chair and approaching the window, by which the lady sat.

"Oh, see, Mr. De Witt, that sign on the house across the way!" Miss Vanderhoven exclaimed.

The old gentleman put on his eye-glasses and stared out of the window.

The house to which his attention had been called by the young lady was a one-storied shanty saloon, and along the front in big letters was painted the name of the establishment.

"The Dew-drop Inn," read Mr. De Witt. "Ah, yes, that is a common name for a saloon. I have seen it in the East a half-a-dozen times."

"I do not mean the name," Miss Vanderhoven exclaimed. "But the small sign painted on a piece of paper and fastened to the board by the door. Do you see it?"

"Yes, yes, now that you call my attention to it I do, but I can not exactly make out what it says. You see, my dear Miss Vanderhoven, my sight is not as good as it used to be."

"The letters are not very distinct for the sign is poorly painted, but I can read it, though, without any trouble, for I am quite long-sighted."

"Yes, I am aware of that."

"I will read it for you."

"If you will be so kind."

"The charming queen of song, Miss Pauline Kemperwell, will sing here at nine to-night. Don't fail to be on hand."

"Pauline Kemperwell—bless my soul!" the old lawyer exclaimed, in an extremely nervous way.

"That is the name of the woman, is it not?" Miss Vanderhoven questioned.

"Yes, that is certainly the name of the woman who claims to be the widow of your Cousin Jack."

"And she was a public singer?"

"Yes, she and her sister—the Kemperwell Sisters they called themselves."

"Do you suppose that this can possibly be her?"

"Well, no, really I don't see how it can be," the old gentleman replied, after reflecting over the matter for a few moments.

"You know that she was in New York when we started on this Western trip, and it does not hardly seem probable that she started and reached this camp before us," Mr. De Witt added.

"Oh, she could have done it without any trouble, if she started anywhere near the time that we did," the young lady observed. "You know that we took our time and we lost nearly a week in Chicago on account of the opera being there."

"Yes, yes, that was true, and was my fault, too, for if I had not suggested that it would be a good idea to rest for a while, so as to break the journey, you would have come straight on."

"It was a pardonable error," the young lady observed, slowly. "Who could foresee that there was any need of haste?"

"That is true," the old gentleman remarked, with a grave shake of the head. "I never even dreamed of such a thing, and even now it does not seem possible to me that this can be the woman. It may be her sister, you know."

Miss Vanderhoven shook her head.

"Oh, no, I cannot agree with you there!" she said, in the curt, decided way so natural to her from long exercise of undisputed power.

"If it was her sister she would use her own name."

"Yes, it certainly seems as if she would; but, if it is the woman, how comes it that she has hurried here to the West?" the old gentleman remarked, in a puzzled way.

"There is only one explanation as far as I can see," the young lady replied. "She became acquainted with our intention to visit the West, and so hurried on here in order to be in readiness to give us trouble in our investigation."

"Well, under the circumstances, it really seems as if that must be the truth."

"You must look into the matter!" Miss Vanderhoven exclaimed with an air of firm determination.

"I will—immediately! that is, by proxy!" the old gentleman replied.

"You know, my dear Miss Vanderhoven, I am not exactly the kind of man who would be apt to make a success of a matter of this nature," the lawyer continued.

"But I have spoken to a party who will be apt to do good work, I think—this Mr. Blake. I did not have a chance to communicate with you about the matter before."

"We were confined in the same wigwam in the Indian village, and from the conversation I had with him I got the idea that I could not pick out a better fellow to get at the truth."

"He is a thorough man of the world, you know, and understands all about these Westerners."

"I think you have acted very wisely in selecting Mr. Blake," Miss Vanderhoven remarked in a thoughtful way.

"He is a superior man!"

And this was said in such a decided manner that it caused a faint look of surprise to appear on the face of the old gentleman.

In all the years that he had been acquainted with the imperious young lady he had never known her to betray so much interest about any man before.

"Eh, bless my soul!" he muttered to himself, "I hope the girl hasn't made the mistake of falling in love with this card-sharper!"

"That would be a very bad bit of business indeed, and perhaps it would be wise for me to give her a slight hint as to the nature of his business—explain how he gets his living."

While the old lawyer was indulging in these reflections, Miss Vanderhoven was looking out of the window, staring at the painted sign, and apparently giving no heed to the lawyer.

In reality, though, from the corner of her eyes, she was keeping watch upon him, and was acute enough to guess from the expression on his face what thoughts were in his mind.

"Yes, this Mr. Blake seems to me to be an extra smart fellow, and when he frankly confessed to me that he wasn't anything but a common gambler, who depended upon his wits for his living, I was very much astonished."

"Well, from what little I have seen of the gentleman I should say that he was a very uncommon gambler," the young lady remarked with a demure smile.

"Ah, yes, I—I don't really know but what you are right about that," De Witt admitted.

"I suppose that you did not have any idea of what his business really was?"

"Oh, yes, I did. Jack has pointed out the leading lights of the fraternity a dozen times to me in New York, and so when I saw this person it did not take me long to come to the conclusion that he is what is called a sport; but I must admit that he is far superior to any of the class that I have ever encountered, and it seems to me to be strange, for in this wild country you would hardly expect that such would be the case."

"Yes, yes, he is quite a superior sort of a fellow," the old gentleman remarked, a little confused, for he saw that his remarks had not produced the effect that he anticipated.

"I think that it would be wise to get Mr. Blake to give his attention to the matter as speedily as possible," Miss Vanderhoven declared.

"Yes, I agree with you, and I will hunt him up and instruct him in regard to the affair, immediately," Mr. De Witt remarked, rising.

"I do not think there will be any necessity to keep back anything that we may know about the matter," the young lady said in a thoughtful way. "I believe that Mr. Blake can be fully trusted, and if he is in possession of all the facts he may be able to do better work."

"Oh, yes, I shall put him in full possession of all the details, and I do not doubt that he will get at the truth in regard to the matter if it is possible for any one to do so," Mr. De Witt observed, and then he took his departure.

"I hope to heaven that she is not going to fall in love with this fellow!" the old lawyer exclaimed, as he descended the stairs. "That would be a nice state of affairs, to be sure!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MINER OBJECTS.

As Mr. De Witt entered the saloon by one door the Fresh of Frisco and the old mountain-man came in by another.

They had just returned from the corral where they had put up their steeds.

The landlord was behind the bar, and greeted the pair warmly.

"Why, old Rattlesnake, you darned old long-legged son-of-a-gun! how was it that the red bucks didn't gather you in this time?" the veteran sport exclaimed.

"Cos my legs hev been too well brought up to see my body abused," the old mountain-man responded with a grin.

"When it comes to a running match I am thar, every time!" he continued.

"Yas, but as a rule I reckon you generally run *inter* the Injuns instead of away from them!" the landlord declared.

"Anyway, that is what the most of the red bucks allow."

"Wa-al, I allers calculate to try to hold my end up the best way I know how; mebbe I don't allers succeed, but I ginerally fotch pretty close to it," the Red Rattlesnake remarked with another one of his shrewd grins.

"This here durned old copper-colored, leather-skinned piece of humanity is a holy terror when he gets a-going, stranger, and you want to keep your eyes peeled for him!" the long-bearded landlord declared in a joking way, now addressing his conversation to Blake.

"Oh, I have got pretty well acquainted with him by this time," the Fresh replied.

"And that reminds me that I havn't caught on to your handle yet. I reckon that you are a friend and a brother, judging from your get up, and I am glad to welcome you to Hardtack City."

"My name is Jackson Blake!"

Doc Slater gave a start of genuine surprise.

"You don't mean it?" he cried.

"Yes, that is my handle."

"Put it there!" and the old sport extended his brawny hand over the counter to the young man.

"I have heard of you, Fresh of Frisco, more times than I have got fingers and toes, and I have often wondered how it was that we never hapened to meet!"

"There is an old saying, you know, better late than never," the Fresh replied.

"Ah, yes, that is true, and I tell you what it is, gentlemen, there is a heap of truth in some of them old adages!" the landlord declared.

"Of course; if there wasn't they never could have come down to us from the dark days of antiquity," Blake remarked.

There was a big, burly, black-headed fellow, roughly dressed, lolling against the bar at the further end of it.

He had his back to the counter and was resting both his elbows on it.

The man was the typical frontier ruffian to the life, and an expression of deep disgust came over his face as he listened to the sport's words.

"Holy smoke! did anbyody ever hear anything like that afore!" he muttered, half to himself, and yet amply loud enough so that everybody else in the room could hear him.

All in the saloon stared and look at the big fellow with the exception of Blake, who acted as if he had not heard the words.

Then, finding that the sport was not disposed to take any notice of him, the fellow continued in a louder and more insolent tone.

"This hyer camp is going to the dogs when a durned hand-box rooster kin come into it and put on frills that are enuff to make a good man sick all through, talkin' as if he had swallowed a dictionary, and the dandy cuss too had the impudence to name his miser'ble old flea-bitten mule arter King Solomon, one of the greatest men wot ever lived."

"I tell you wot, feller citizens, it riled my good, old, rich American blood when I beerd him tell the nigger at the corral to take keer of King Solomon, and he meant his gol-durned crnery old mule, a reg'lar walking skeleton of a beast that ary sensible man would be ashamed to waste powder and shot onto!"

This speech riveted the attention of every one in the room on the man, for it was not perfectly apparent to all that he was one of those saloon bullies who are the pests of frontier towns; men who delight to go out of their way to force a quarrel with unoffending strangers.

But the bully was not the first man who had picked Jackson Blake up for a tenderfoot, and discovered to his cost and sorrow later on that he had made a great mistake.

The Fresh turned sharply on the man the moment the speech was ended, and exclaimed in a quiet but very decided tone:

"What business have you to make remarks about the name of my mule? If I had named him after you, now, you might have objected, although I suppose the name would have fitted him better than King Solomon."

"Named him arter me?" cried the bully in astonishment, taking his arms from the counter and turning so as to face the sport.

"Yes, that is what I said."

"But I reckon that you don't know my name!"

"I reckon I do."

"Wot is it?"

"Billy Jackass!"

Then there was an explosion of laughter.

The miners roared with delight, for just by ac-

cident the Fresh had hit on the first name of the fellow.

"Wot's that?" roared the man in a terrible rage, doubling up his big fists and advancing upon the sport.

"Are you deaf, or can't you understand good, plain United States language when you hear it?" the sport exclaimed, bracing himself for action, and the peculiar glint of fire coming in his eyes, the certain sign that he meditated an offensive movement.

"My name is Bill Ugly, I want you to understand, and I am a mighty tough man to run up ag'in', too, you had better believe!" the big fellow declared.

He was mad all through, as the saying is, and had made up his mind to give the sport a pounding which would last him for a while, but as he had no doubt about his being able to accomplish this feat without any particular trouble, he was in no hurry to begin.

He wanted to play with his victim for a while, cat fashion, before proceeding to action.

"The name suits you first-rate, Ugly Billy Jackass!" retorted the sport.

Again the bystanders laughed; it was rare sport for them to see the big bully chaffed to his face.

"You mis'ble hound! don't you dar' to call me outen my name!" cried the ruffian, shaking his big fist at the sport.

"Are you anxious for me to go in and lay you out?" exclaimed the Fresh, throwing himself into a boxing attitude, and squaring away at the other in an extremely scientific way.

The big fellow was amazed. He had no idea that the other would dare to face him, for in his opinion the sport, being a so much smaller man than himself, did not stand any chance in a contest.

"You don't r'ally mean to say that you hev any idee that you kin stand up again a man like me, do ye?" he ejaculated.

"If you are ripe for fuss just sail in and if I don't whip you to a stand-still inside of ten minutes then you are a far better man than I think you are!" the sport replied, promptly.

"Oh, you are only blowing now I reckon—kinder talking through yer hat!" Ugly Bill declared with a contemptuous sneer.

"Or mebbe, you are soft enuff to think you kin skeer me with a few big words, but if that is yer little game I kin tell you that you never made a bigger mistake in your life.

"Wah! I kin walk all over you and not half try either."

"Come on and don't waste your breath, for I reckon you will need all you have got before you get through with this picnic!" Blake exclaimed, and then with the ease and grace of an experienced boxer he made a "lead" with his right fist for the prominent nose of the bully, and although it was only intended for a playful feint yet it came so near to Ugly Bill's face as to cause him to throw his arms up wildly in a clumsy attempt to guard against the blow, and jump back so as to get his nose out of harm's way.

The lookers-on grinned.

Already all of them who knew any thing about boxing had come to the conclusion that the strange sport was no slouch—to use the vernacular—when it came to a sparring match, and they gleefully anticipated that there was fun ahead.

As to just how good a man Bill Ugly, or Ugly Bill, as he delighted to call himself, was, no one really knew.

He was a new-comer in the camp and being a big overgrown fellow, when he had announced that he was the biggest kind of a chief, no one, so far, had cared to dispute the assertion.

He was big enough, and ugly enough, to be a first-class warrior, and although he had done a good deal of talking since his arrival in the camp, he had not been engaged in any actual contest.

The town had taken him at his word that he was the toughest kind of a nut in a row and allowed him to boast with impunity.

"Oh, come now! that is no way to do!" the Fresh exclaimed as the big fellow jumped back. "You ought to stand right up to the rack and take your fodder like a man, you know."

"No jumping Jack business! You never were cut out for anything of that kind, and you will never make a success at it! You are nothing but a clumsy elephant-like duffer, and the best thing you can do is to stand still and let me hammer some sense into you!"

This speech irritated the big fellow greatly.

"You darned mean, mis'able Jack-a-dandy!" he roared, swinging his arms, windmill-fashion, in the air, "I will soon show you that you made the biggest kind of a mistake when you dar'd to stack up ag'in' me!"

"We have had enough of talk—try a little action!" the sport exclaimed.

Then he made another feint with his right at the big bully's face, and when that worthy threw up his arms to guard, leaving his body uncovered, just as the Fresh had calculated, the adventurer sent in a left-hander with such vigor that the blow fairly doubled up the man, and in spite of himself he was forced to utter a grunt of pain which was heard all over the room.

The bystanders chuckled with delight, for this was a rare show indeed.

Nerved to desperation by the pain the big fellow made a ferocious rush at the sport.

Blake dodged under the arm of the attacker and contrived to extend his foot so that Ugly Bill tripped over it.

Down on his hands and knees fell the ruffian, sprawling on the floor like a huge frog to the intense amusement of the spectators.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DECIDING THE QUESTION.

THE Fresh of 'Frisco now had his antagonist exactly where he wanted him.

In a contest of this kind, regular rules did not "go," so as soon as the bully was down, Blake proceeded to administer a tremendous series of kicks.

As fast as the man attempted to rise a violent kick brought him down again, and at the same time propelled him toward the door; each kick bringing a howl of rage from the discomfited ruffian.

Ten good solid kicks Blake gave the man and the tenth one took him through the door, landing him in the street, sprawling all in a heap.

Now although this performance was anything but funny to the man who received the kicks, yet it appealed so strongly to the risibilities of the bystanders that a great number of them laughed until the tears came in their eyes.

"Now, sport, you will have to look out for yourself, for the odds are good that the galoot will pull a gun on you!" the landlord warned.

"Oh, yes, no doubt! Some men are such fools that you have got to about kill them to get any sense into their heads," the Fresh rejoined, drawing his revolver as he spoke.

As the landlord had anticipated, as soon as Ugly Bill scrambled to his feet, he reached for his "gun" and came rushing back into the saloon almost breathless with excitement and rage.

He had just got his revolver out as he came through the door, but before he could raise the hammer the Fresh had him "covered."

"Go slow, now!" was the stern command that Blake gave. "Don't attempt to cock that gun or I will put a ball right through you! I have got the drop on you in the worst kind of way, and unless you are anxious to be put in a condition for planting you will haul in your horns!"

The bystanders had scattered to the sides of the room when it became apparent that there was a good chance for a "shooting match," none of them being willing to stop a stray bullet, so the fighters about had the saloon to themselves.

Furious as was the ruffian at the defeat which he had met with, yet he was not so blinded with rage as to be unable to see that the sport had him at a terrible disadvantage.

He was looking right into the muzzle of Blake's leveled revolver, and there was a look in the face of the sport which satisfied even his dull senses that the other would undoubtedly be as good as his word.

Then he noticed that the hammer of his opponent's revolver was not raised, but as he had a suspicion that it was a self-cocking tool he dared not go upon the assumption that it was not and "pull" on the sport.

He could not forbear a "growl" though.

"I reckon you hain't got sich a heap sight the advantage!" Ugly Bill ejaculated. "The hammer of yer pistol ain't raised!"

"You know deuced well that it is a self-cocker, or else you would never take the trouble to call my attention to the fact," the sport retorted.

"Just keep your eye on the hammer now for a moment," he continued.

And then with a gentle pressure he caused the striker to move.

"You see I have you foul," Blake continued. "And if I choose to pull on you, your life would not be worth a red cent."

The ruffian glared at the sport for a minute and then he shook his head in a sullen way.

"Say, ain't you going to give me any kind of a show?" he demanded.

"I reckon that if you got the drop on me I might whistle for a show, and that is all the good it would do me!" Blake replied.

"That ain't so!" Ugly Bill declared. "I allers allow to giv every man a show!"

"What do you want—a little more fist-fighting so as to fully satisfy yourself that you are not half as good a man as you thought you was?" Blake asked in a sarcastic way.

"Naw!" responded the big fellow, sulkily.

Although he really had not tested the abilities of his antagonist in that line but in an extremely limited way yet he had got the idea that Blake was a head and shoulders above any man that he had ever run across, and he was not anxious to have anything more to do with him in the boxing line.

But as he was hungry for revenge he wanted a fair chance at the sport in a "shooting-match," hoping to be able to turn the tables on him.

"Got all you want in the boxing line?"

"Yas, and I am arter blood now."

"Just hungry for gore, eh?" the sport remarked, in a careless, indifferent way.

"Oh, well, I reckon I will have to try and accommodate you, for that is the kind of a hair-pin I am!"

"You don't dar' to come out in the street and g'in me a fair crack at you with a revolver!" the big fellow asserted.

"Oh, yes, I dare! And you never made a bigger mistake in the world than when you say that I don't!" Blake replied, immediately.

"I know just what kind of a fellow you are, as well as though I had been acquainted with you for years. You have got a thick head, and it is an extremely hard matter to beat any sense into it, but as I have kinder got into the job, I am going to do my best to make a success out of it."

"You just march out to the street—go up or down, just as you please, for a hundred paces; then I will come out, and we will see who is the best man of us two."

"Does that suit you?"

"You bet!" the big fellow responded, defiantly.

"All I want is a fair show, and if I don't put you in a condition for planting, then I ain't as good a man as I think I am."

"Well, you are not!" the Fresh responded, in the coolest possible manner.

"You are not half as good a man as you think you are," Blake continued. "I have met a lot of big-mouthed blowhards of your style in my time, and it has always given me a deal of satisfaction to stick a pin in the walking gas-tags, and let out a little of the wind."

"You won't stick no pin in me!" the big fellow declared, shaking his head in an angry way.

"That remains to be seen. It is pretty hard work to tell who is governor until after the election," the sport replied in his brisk, business-like way.

"But come! we are losing time and wasting breath! March out into the street, and then we will see what we will see."

"I will fix you this time for keeps, and you kin bet all you are worth on it, too!" Ugly Bill declared, as he shoved his revolver back into its holster, and then stalked out into the street.

"How is that fellow—a big bully and a general nuisance, eh?" Blake asked of the landlord.

"Yes, I reckon that you have sized him up about right," the veteran sport replied.

"He has only been in the camp about a week, but has done a heap of blowing about how good a man he is in that time, and as he is an overgrown sort of a galoot the boys have kinder fought shy of tackling him, for fear that he might be a holy terror."

"Ah, yes, I see. Well, big words and a big man generally make considerable of an impression, but you can not always tell by either a man's size or his words just how good he is."

"In this case, I take very little stock in the party. He is no fighter when it comes to fists, and I doubt his making a much better show with weapons."

"I reckon he is what the sporting-men call a big stuff, and if you can arrange to run him out of the camp, there is not a doubt but his room will be a great deal better than his company," Doc Slater remarked, with the air of a judge.

"I don't really care to kill the fellow, although I have no doubt he will do his level best to lay me out," the Fresh remarked, in a reflective way. "And from what I have seen of him, too, I should judge that he is a man who can well be spared, being of little use to himself or anybody else; still, as I am not bloodthirsty, I would rather somebody else would give such scoundrels their tickets to the other world."

"But you have got to look out for yourself, you know," the landlord urged.

"I should reckon from what I have seen of this fellow that he would be just the one not to care a continental whether he killed anybody or not," Doc Slater continued.

"And when I run across a man of that kind, I reckon that he ought to be served just about as mad dogs are treated."

"I don't know but what you are right," the sport remarked, thoughtfully. "Such men are certainly better out of the world than in it, for like mad dogs, they are apt to rend and tear all with whom they come in contact."

While this exchange of views had been going on between Blake and the landlord, all the rest in the apartment were occupied in keeping watch on the big fellow, either by means of the door or windows, and now the old mountain-man uttered a warning.

"The cuss is all ready for you, Blake!" the Red Rattlesnake exclaimed.

"And I say, pardner, don't go to fooling with this galoot—don't reckon to let up easy on him, you know, for he is inclined to be wolfish, an' it is my idea that he will do all he kin to salivate yer."

"Well, unless some accident happens, I will fix him so that he will not be able to damage anybody for a month of Sundays," Blake replied, as he advanced to the door.

Out into the street he went, while the rest followed eagerly, anxious to secure good positions to witness the contest, for there is no fight in the

world that appeals so strongly to the average man than when humans are opposed in battle array.

The big fellow was about a hundred feet up the street.

According to his calculation, that distance was about as far as a revolver could be depended upon.

He had taken the middle of the road, and was all ready for the fight, when the sport appeared.

As Blake proceeded to the center of the street, the lookers-on flattened themselves against the walls on both sides of the way, anxious not to lose a single incident of the coming conflict, yet a little afraid of stray bullets.

In a street fight it is generally the case that the bystanders stand as much chance of getting hit as the principals.

It was Blake's idea to disable his opponent, and so the moment he got in position he opened fire upon him, firing purposely high, so that the bullets would whistle about the ears of the bully, and as he fired he advanced rapidly upon his antagonist.

It was his design to "rattle" the big fellow. The game succeeded to perfection.

Startled by the singing bullets, the big fellow blazed away, but it takes an extra good revolver-shot to hit his man at seventy or eighty feet, and as Ugly Bill was not a good shot, all his bullets went wide of the mark.

Then Blake put a shot into the big fellow's left shoulder, causing him to drop his pistol as though it had suddenly become red-hot, then, becoming panic-stricken, the man took to his heels and fled at the top of his speed.

CHAPTER XXV. THE SERIO-COMIC.

THE Fresh of 'Frisco had won an easy victory, and a yell of derision went up from the miners as the big fellow took to his heels and ran as fast as he was able.

"He's no fighter—but a champion foot-racer," Doc Slater exclaimed.

And then, just in a spirit of mischief, the miners drew their pistols and banged away at the retreating man.

He was out of range, and there wasn't any danger of the bullets hitting him, but for all that the volley seemed to lend him wings, and in a very few minutes he was out of sight.

The miners were as pleased over this occurrence as a lot of children with a new toy, and their mirth was unbounded.

"Well, I don't know as I am much of a prophet," the veteran landlord-sport remarked, "but I don't mind putting myself on record as being willing to make a good big bet with any gentleman here that this camp has seen the last of Ugly Bill for a good long time."

No one was willing to take the bet, for it was the general opinion that after this remarkable exhibition of cowardice that the big fellow had given, he would never come back to the camp if he could possibly avoid it.

The Fresh was the hero of the hour, and if he had been willing to accept all the drinks that his admirers tendered him, he would have been compelled to retire to the seclusion that his bedroom granted.

But Blake was not a drinking man, and in downright plain terms he gave the crowd to understand the fact.

"I shall be pleased to take one glass of ale with you, gentlemen, but that is all!" he declared.

The crowd did not attempt to persuade him to depart from this declaration, for from the little they had seen of the sport, they had an idea that he was a man who would be pretty certain to hold to what he said.

When Doc Slater served the sport with the ale, he took occasion to remark:

"I have heard a good deal of you, Mr. Blake, at one time and another, and I have often wondered how it was that you came to get so queer a handle as the Fresh of 'Frisco, but from the little bit of an insight which I got into your character to-day I can understand how it is that most people seem to think that the name fits you so well."

"Yes, I am too fresh, as the saying goes, not a doubt about that!" the sport declared, with a laugh.

"If there is anything going on when I am around I am bound to have a finger in the pie, and it does not matter much whether it concerns me or not."

"Another peculiarity of mine is that when I get into a little snarl of this kind that I have just got through with, I always go in to meet my man a good deal more than half-way, particularly if the thing happens to occur in a new town, where the people haven't got very well acquainted with me, for you see it gives me a chance to show just what kind of a man I am, and after people find me out they are apt to get on a good deal better with me than as if they did not know me."

The miners looked at each other and smiled as they listened to this explanation.

In their opinion there was a deal of truth in what the sport said.

After the display of his abilities which the sharp had given it was pretty safe betting that

mighty few men in that camp would care to make an enemy of Jackson Blake if it were possible to avoid it.

Mr. De Witt had witnessed the whole of this extraordinary scene and was more and more impressed with the idea that Blake was one of the most remarkable men whom he had ever encountered.

He had not been able to get speech with the sport until all the excitement was over; then, after the saloon had settled down into its usual quiet, he got the sport into a corner, where he could converse with him secure from interlopers, and proceeded to explain what was desired.

Blake was surprised when he learned the particulars in regard to the show-bill.

"Well, well, that is rather odd," he observed in a thoughtful way. "It really looks as if the girl had got wind of your trip to this region for the purpose of securing evidence, and had hurried herself so as to be on the ground."

"This is exactly what Miss Vanderhoven suggested," the old gentleman remarked. "But really, you know, I can hardly bring myself to believe that it can be possible."

"Oh, I don't know about that. It seems to me to be just such a move as a sharp girl such as you describe this one to be, would be likely to make under the circumstances."

"Well, if it is the truth it shows that she is playing a very deep game," the old lawyer declared with an owl-like shake of his gray head.

"The stake is a big one, and it is only natural for the girl to do the best she can in the matter."

"If it is the girl it is evident that she is going to make quite a struggle, and the quicker we set to work to find out how much truth there is in the story she has told, the better."

"Yes, that is undoubtedly so."

"I have jotted down the leading points," Mr. De Witt said, producing a memorandum. "Here are all the particulars for you to work upon."

"In my judgment, the first point is to find out all you can in regard to the girl; then take up the minister who performed the wedding ceremony, this Reverend Jabez Robinson; from what little I have seen of this place I must assume that any minister who dwells here is a very strange sort of a clergyman; after you ascertain all you can about the minister, look after the witnesses to the ceremony."

"Michael Dufoy and George James," said the sport, consulting the memorandum.

"Yes, those are the names of the witnesses, and take notice, too, that all three of the men are also witnesses to the death of Jack Vanderhoven."

"Well, I am a little in doubt as to whether that is a suspicious circumstance or not," Blake remarked, slowly.

"Of course it may be only a coincidence, and yet it seems rather odd to me!" the old lawyer declared with a grave shake of the head.

"It depends a good deal upon the circumstances," the sharp observed.

"It was natural that the minister should be present at the marriage," Blake continued. "The parties could not get married without a minister to perform the ceremony."

"Witnesses were required, and, as a rule, in a camp of this kind when a man goes through an operation of that kind he usually gets a couple of his particular friends to see him through."

"But you must remember that young Vanderhoven was a stranger here and so he could not have had any particular friends," Mr. De Witt urged.

"He spent three or four weeks in the camp?"

"Oh, yes, fully as much as that."

"These free and easy Westerners are a genial, warm-hearted people, and the way they cotton to a stranger, particularly if he has plenty of money to spend, is wonderful," the sport remarked.

Now take such a man as Jack Vanderhoven and set him down in this camp, with enough loose cash about his person to hold his end up with the boys, and there isn't a doubt that inside of a couple of days he would fall in with some gang with whom he would be as intimate as though they had all been brought up together."

"Speculation of course is idle, and, really, we are only wasting our time in indulging in it," Mr. De Witt observed with a judicial air.

"Exactly, and the quicker I set to work to get at the truth of the matter the better."

"That is certainly correct, and I have faith enough in you, Mr. Blake, to believe that you can learn all the particulars without any trouble."

"If I do not succeed it will not be for want of trying," the sport declared and this brought the interview to an end.

The old gentleman departed and Blake began to calculate how he had best proceed.

"In my opinion the odds are a hundred to one that this Pauline Kemperwell is the girl who claims to have married young Vanderhoven," the Fresh mused.

"And her prompt arrival on the ground here shows that she means business."

"The old lawyer is a little slow, and there-

fore is puzzled to guess how she learned that he and Miss Vanderhoven had journeyed to this Western wilderness with the idea of examining with their own eyes into the merits of the girl's claim."

"If he was sharp, and up to the times, he would suspect that the girl was not soft enough to believe that this wealthy old New York family were going to admit that there was anything to her claim without making the biggest kind of a fight."

"The girl expected trouble right from the beginning, and was shrewd enough to be on her guard."

"After she had stated her claim and been politely requested to wait, she was shrewd enough to suspect that the old lawyer was talking smoothly to her for the express purpose of gaining time so as to prepare to successfully resist her claim."

"How easy would it have been then for her to put a shadow on the old gentleman so as to learn just what he was up to."

"That is the game that she played, undoubtedly, and when she learned that the lawyer and Miss Vanderhoven were going on a western trip she suspected immediately that the pair were coming to this camp with the idea of finding out just how much truth there was in her claim."

"The girl would have been very stupid indeed, not to have come to that conclusion, and so she hurried on here in order to be on the ground, prepared for any emergency."

"Now then the question rises: who shall I strike for information?"

"The landlord! The chances are big that the New Yorker made the hotel his headquarters and Doc will be able to post me."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE LANDLORD EXPLAINS.

JUST as the sport came to this conclusion the landlord came from behind the bar, his assistant having arrived to relieve him.

Blake beckoned to him, and Doc Slater came over to where the sport was sitting.

"Have you got time to spare for a little chat?" the Fresh asked.

"Oh, yes," the landlord replied, helping himself to a chair. "There isn't any business in the daytime, you know."

"I wanted to see if I could get a little information from you."

"Well, I reckon you can, if I am able to give it."

"It is a little private matter and must be kept quiet."

"Men in our line are not usually talkers," the host responded with a knowing nod.

"You understood that though I do keep a hotel, yet that is not my regular business—only a side issue, so to speak."

"Yes, I comprehend, and the reason why I spoke to you about this matter was because I felt sure I could depend on your discretion."

"A still tongue makes a wise head," the landlord observed. "That is an old saying, and one that men in our line live up to as a general rule."

"That is a fact," the sport assented.

"It is just by accident that I became mixed up in this business," Blake continued. "It does not concern me personally at all, for the old gentleman, Mr. De Witt, who is a New York lawyer, has charge of the affair, but as he is not used to the ways of the West he thought he would get along faster if he made a bargain with me to look after the matter."

"That was a very sensible move on his part!" the veteran sport exclaimed with an approving nod.

Then Blake told the story of Jack Vanderhoven.

"Oho! so this elegant young female is a cousin of that fellow, eh?" Doc Slater asked.

"Yes, and her sole object in coming to this camp is to ascertain the truth in regard to this alleged marriage of Jack Vanderhoven."

"Well, do you know I think you will find that to be a much more difficult job than you anticipate," the host observed in a reflective way.

"Is that possible?"

"Yes, I reckon it is, and it is lucky that you spoke to me about the matter, for I am about as well posted in regard to the affair as any man in the camp."

"That was my calculation. As landlord of a place like this, the leading resort of the town, you ought to know pretty well about all that goes on."

"That is true, and as I am one of the kind of men too that usually keeps his eyes open, there is not much goes on without my knowledge."

"I thought when I saw the lady that she looked a wonderful sight like somebody I had seen before, but this Jack Vanderhoven never came into my mind."

"In the first place I never took any stock in his story that his name was what he said it was," Doc Slater explained.

"You see the man was under a cloud from the day he came into the camp until the one on which he left it for the other world."

"He was under the influence of liquor when he arrived, and I don't hardly believe that he

drew a really sober breath while he was in the camp."

"A first-class high-roller, eh?"

"Oh, yes, that is he wanted to be, but he did not have money enough to cut as big a dash as he would have liked to have done."

"He stopped here with me for a while, and when his money gave out went to live with a miner who had a cabin on the outskirts of the camp."

"The fellow would not have gone, you understand, if he could have got me to have trusted him and he gave me a lot of fairy stories about how his remittances from New York were unaccountably delayed, and that as soon as they arrived he would be in funds and able to square up," the landlord explained.

"And he showed me some letters, too, from a New York lawyer which apparently proved that he was speaking the truth—by the way, they were from this De Witt, I think, now that I come to recall the particulars."

"Yes, that gentleman did send him a regular allowance."

"I did not take any stock in the statements at all," Doc Slater declared. "And I told the young fellow in the frankest manner possible that while I hadn't any doubt that everything was just as he had said, yet as I did business on a strict cash basis it would not be possible for me to come to any arrangement with him in regard to credit."

"I don't presume that he liked that sort of thing?"

"Oh, no, he didn't. He got on his high-horse right away, and began to blow about what a great man he was in New York and how much money his family had, but I gently called him down and told him that talk wouldn't answer for cash in the Pink Palace."

"It was either put up or get out, and he got."

"And extremely angry, I presume?"

"Yes, he never came in my place again, but that didn't worry me any," the host declared with a smile.

"He was one of the kind of men that I hate to have around," Doc Slater continued. "He would get full, and when he was in that condition was inclined to be impudent, and I suppose I had to interfere a half a dozen times to keep some of the boys from warming him."

"Such men are nuisances."

"Then he got in with a miner and went to his cabin, and I never saw the fellow again, although I heard enough about him, for after he left my shebang he got to running after this Pauline Kemperwell, who was singing then—as she is now—at the Dewdrop Inn across the street, and as she seemed to take a good deal of notice of him it was the general opinion among the boys that she believed the fellow's yarns about what a great man he was in New York, and was supplying him with money, for most certainly he was getting some cash from somebody."

"I reckon the boys got it about right."

"And then the next thing I heard was that the fellow was sick, and a day after that the report was all around town that Pauline had been married to the New Yorker and had gone up to the cabin to look after him."

"But where did the minister come from?"

"The miner that gave Vanderhoven shelter was a minister," Doc Slater explained.

"Or at any rate that was the yarn he gave out when he first struck the town, and as he looked like a dominie, and was a mighty smooth talker, when he asked me if he couldn't have the use of my saloon for Sunday afternoon, as it was the biggest room in the town, so he could give the boys a little Gospel talk, I said, 'yes,' at once, for I am always ready to help anything of the kind along."

"The thing came off all right, and I reckon that about everybody within ten miles was here; the saloon was crowded, and the best of order was maintained."

"I looked after that, you know, for I give the meeting a bit of a talk before the dominie chipped in; I told the boys I wanted to see them behave themselves, and as the thing was being run in my saloon I should feel obligated to shoot the first man who attempted to kick up a disturbance."

"A gentle hint of that kind coming from a man like yourself had a deal of weight, of course," the sport remarked, in the most matter-of-fact way possible.

"Oh, yes; there never was a quieter meeting, and it was really wonderful too for the dominie was not up to the mark."

"Any one could see that he had not lied about being a Gospel sharp, but he was a mighty poor one; one of the kind whose best holt was in howling at the top of his voice, and beating the pulpit all to pieces—he about ruined the table I let him have."

"In fact, the only part of the sermon that was worth shucks was at the end when he came out strong about how it was every man's duty to ante up all he could for the support of religion, and he hoped his hearers would chip in lively when he sent the hat around."

"Well, it is a poor kind of a man who cannot make a good speech when he knows that he is

talking for his own personal gain," Blake observed.

"That is mighty true. Well, the collection was a good one, and, would you believe it, the dominie used some of the money to get as full as a tick that night."

"A nice kind of a Gospel sharp he was!"

"It was the first and last time he ever tackled the Gospel business in this camp!" the landlord declared. "A few of the boys were for giving him a coat of tar and feathers and then riding him out of town on a rail. But I opposed that, and so many sided with me that we upset the idea."

"Any man was liable to get full at times, and a dominie was only a man when all was done, and my recommendation was that a committee should wait on the fellow and tell him we didn't want any more of his preaching, and if he wanted to stay in the town he must let up on it."

"That was about the right thing to do."

"That was how we worked it. The man took the thing coolly enough. Said he knew he was more fond of his fire-water than a minister ought to be, and allowed that he had better give up the Gospel business; said that his thirst for liquor had run him out of the East, and he reckoned he had better go into mining."

"A fool for luck, you know, is an old saying, and a drunken man comes pretty near to being a fool, so I don't suppose it wasn't any wonder that he struck a good claim on the very first day he went prospecting, right on the outskirts of the camp too, in a spot where a dozen men walk daily."

"These odd things happen sometimes," Blake observed.

"Yes, sir, he struck it rich!" Doc Slater declared. "Men in the dominie's neighborhood—everybody calls him the dominie, although no one who hears him swear when he is drunk, would believe he had ever been a parson—who are in a position to know, say that he is taking out from ten to fifteen dollars per day, clear money and he does not half work the claim either, for as he gets full every night he seldom gets to work before noon."

"A nice kind of a fellow to pretend to be a Gospel sharp, the sport observed."

"He has only tried the dominie dodge on three times since he has been in the camp," the landlord explained. "First, when he held the meeting; second, when he married the New Yorker to Pauline Kemperwell; and third, when Jack Vanderhoven was buried and he took care of the funeral."

"There is no doubt that Vanderhoven was married to the girl?"

"I reckon not. There were two men present as witnesses, and when I heard that I said at the time, after hearing all the particulars of the affair, that I reckoned the gal had an idea that somebody might try to make out she wasn't married, and she had things fixed so as to be able to prove it without much difficulty."

"Michael Dufoy and George James were the witnesses," Blake remarked, consulting his memorandum.

"Yes, Mike Dufoy is the man who runs the Dewdrop shebang; he is Pauline Kemperwell's brother-in-law. She was Mrs. Dufoy when she came to this camp. Her husband was named Dick, and he was in partnership with his brother, but there was a skirmish in the saloon one night, and in it Dick Dufoy was killed, so the woman became a widow, and was free to marry the New Yorker when he came along," Doc Slater explained.

"And who is George James?"

"The barkeeper at the Dewdrop, and a mighty tough customer he is, too," the landlord replied.

"He's a prize-fighter and a killer of the first water," Doc Slater added.

CHAPTER XXVII.

GETTING AT THE TRUTH.

BLAKE pondered over the matter for a few moments and then he shook his head in a doubtful way.

"It seems to me that this girl has got a pretty strong case," he remarked.

"She is about as keen and smart as they make 'em!" Doc Slater declared.

"And when a woman of her stamp goes into a thing of this kind you can depend upon it that she is going to take all possible precautions so as to have the game go through all right."

"It seems almost incredible that a man like Jack Vanderhoven, of a good family and with his future secured, should take it into his head to marry a girl like this who makes a living by singing in a regular dive; still, men of good standing have done just such foolish things, and as Vanderhoven was a hard drinker he might have married her at a time when he was so much under the influence of liquor as not to be able to tell what he was doing."

"Very likely that the game was worked that way, but you can bet your life that you nor anybody else, will ever be able to prove it!" the landlord declared in a very decided way.

"Oh, yes, I understand that. I have not

missed any of the points of the game," the sport replied.

"I comprehend that all these witnesses are birds of a feather and can be depended upon to swear to what they claim to be the truth in the stoutest manner."

"The minister is a scallawag and will declare that Jack Vanderhoven was perfectly sober, and knew exactly what he was about, when he married the girl."

"In fact, I think the chances are good that the old fellow will be prepared to swear that it was only after long and repeated solicitations that the New Yorker could induce the girl to consent to be married to him."

"No doubt! Some such game will be worked, and the rest will back up the statement."

"And the only witness who can prove that the story is a lie is the New Yorker, and I reckon he has gone to a land where court summonses will not trouble him much."

"That is true enough," Blake replied.

"On the face of the matter it looks as if the girl had put up a game which can not be beaten."

"Sure as you are born!"

"And I reckon that if I was a regular detective, one of the fellow's with gimlet eyes, who can see further into a millstone than the man who drilled the hole, I should be mighty apt, after interviewing the gang and finding out that they had put up the strongest kind of a job, to report to my principals that they might as well compromise the thing, for they could not hope to win."

Doc Slater looked a little puzzled and shook his head in a doubtful way.

"You don't mean to say that you think there is any chance to beat the game?" he asked.

"Yes, it is my opinion that there is a bare chance, a sort of forlorn hope, so to speak."

"Blame me if I see a weak point anywhere in the thing!" Doc Slater declared after meditating over the matter for a moment.

"I am merely going on a supposition," the sport exclaimed. "It may be, you know, that there isn't anything in it, but when a man gets hold of a desperate case, like this one, he must do his level best to take a trick."

"Ah, yes, but the smartest player can't win if the cards are running dead against him."

"Very true, but I am going to try and change the luck."

"Maybe you can, but I'll be blessed if I can see a ghost of a show for you!"

"From what I have heard of this woman I assume that she is thirty-five or thirty-eight, maybe forty."

"Yes, I should think you are not far out of the way. She is no chicken, that is certain."

"A woman who has passed through a pretty rough experience, and has, probably, had a hard time of it?"

"Yes, and that is the reason why she is so durned sharp; there is no school in the world like experience to sharpen one's wits."

"A woman of forty who doesn't look to be over twenty-five or thirty, with the exception that all the freshness and bloom of youth is gone, and in their place has come the hard sharpness that earnest and rude contact with the world produces."

"You have described the party to a dot!" the landlord exclaimed.

"And now comes the point—the only chance that there can possibly be to beat the woman's well contrived and developed game."

"Was she free to marry Jack Vanderhoven when the wedding took place?"

Doc Slater saw what the sport was driving at immediately, and he shook his head in a reflective way.

"Well, as far as anybody knows here, she was," he replied, slowly.

"The husband with whom she came to this camp was dead."

"Oh, yes, killed as I told you."

"I remember; but was he the only husband that she had?"

The landlord shook his head.

"You are too much for me, sport!" he exclaimed. "I will have to pass on that."

"Marriage ties sit lightly on the soul of a woman of this kind, you know, and it is not often that women of this class trouble the divorce courts. When they tire of a husband they quietly leave him, and after a time, when another fellow comes along who suits their fancy, they straightway get married to him, without troubling their heads about the fact that there is another man in existence to whom they are legally bound."

Doc Slater listened with the utmost attention to the sport's explanation and was much impressed.

"Blake, you are about as keen as they make 'em, I must say!" the veteran sport declared.

"I have a kind of a sneaking notion that I am no slouch, myself, when it comes to brain work, and while you have been getting the points of this thing I have kinder studied it up, and the only conclusion I could come to was that you would not be able to do anything, but this idea of yours may amount to something."

"It is the only chance," the sport replied. "If the woman can't be caught on it then her game is sure to win."

"I am only going on the probabilities, you see," Blake exclaimed.

"To my mind it seems more than likely that a woman who has led such a life as this one undoubtedly has led for twenty odd years would be pretty certain to have had two or three husbands in that time, and if she has been careless enough to take it for granted that some one of the husbands was dead, and then went and married another man without taking the trouble to go through the formality of getting a divorce from the first one, then I may be able to get the best of her."

"The game is worth trying, anyway," the landlord remarked.

"Oh, yes, there is no doubt about that. It is the only chance, as I said, and if it fails to work, the woman will win."

"Where will I find this dominie, Jabez Robinson?"

"Take the north trail after you get out of the camp, and keep on for about half a mile, then in the foot-hills to the right you will see a little cabin built in against a bluff, with two half-dead pines before the door. You will hardly be able to miss it if you keep your eyes open."

"I will go and have a talk with the man, although it is not likely that I will get much out of him," the Fresh remarked, as he rose to his feet.

"No, I don't believe that you will, for he is a slippery old customer."

"I have got to try, of course, but I reckon I will only have my labor for my pains," the sport observed, as he took his departure.

Thanks to the plain directions given by the veteran sport, Blake found the cabin of the dominie-miner without any trouble.

The door of the house was open as the sport came up, and just inside the threshold, smoking a short, black pipe, sat an elderly man.

He was rather short and stout in build, with iron-gray hair and stubby beard of the same hue.

Although the man was dressed as roughly as the average miner, yet from the looks of his hands and a certain expression on his face, it was plain that he had never been used to any hard manual labor.

"Is this Mr. Jabez Robinson?" Blake asked.

"That is my name," the other replied, looking at the sport with a questioning glance.

"You are a minister, I am told," the Fresh continued, seating himself upon a bowlder which conveniently cropped out of the earth a yard from the cabin door.

"Yes, I am a minister, although without a church at present."

"But you possess the proper authority to marry people, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes; the fact that I am not at present occupying a pulpit, hasn't anything to do with it. I am a minister in good standing," the old fellow declared, with an unctuous drawl.

"Say, parson, don't take offense now at what I am going to tell you," Blake remarked, with an appearance of great honesty.

The other blinked his dull, fish-like eyes, and appeared to be a little uneasy.

"Oh, that is all right, my friend," he replied, slowly. "I don't believe that you are the kind of man to say anything to annoy me."

"It is only some loose talk of the boys," the sport explained.

The face of the dominie-miner brightened up immediately, and it was plain that he felt relieved.

"Oh, I never trouble myself about anything of that kind!" he exclaimed. "The boys will talk, and they usually say a good deal more than their prayers."

"Some of them were allowing that you could not legally marry anybody; they declared that you had been expelled from the pulpit, and as you had been kicked out of the church, you wasn't a minister any more," the sport said, bluntly.

The old man looked annoyed, and he made an impatient gesture.

"Now, my dear sir, you must not pay any attention to any loose talk of this kind!" Robinson replied.

"The fellows who made that statement did not know what they were talking about."

"Now, just think the matter over, and apply a fair amount of reason to the subject," the old man continued.

"In the first place, what does any one in this camp know about me? There is not a man in the town who ever saw or heard of me before, or can tell where I came from of his own knowledge."

"The explanation of the matter is that the boys have discovered my weakness; I am fond of liquor, and drink more than is good for me, so on this fact they base their opinion that I must have been expelled from a church somewhere."

"Ah, yes, I see, a natural conclusion for them to come to under the circumstances."

"But it is not the truth!" the other declared, earnestly.

"When I was East I took better care of my-

self than I do now, and though I drank, yet I was cautious about it."

"I will admit that I did get into trouble on account of my drinking habits, and charges were made against me, but as I had a number of good friends the affair was hushed up, and I was allowed to resign; so you see that though I retired under a cloud yet I was still a minister in good standing, and I am now just as competent to perform the marriage ceremony as any minister in the land."

"Well, I reckoned that there wasn't any truth in the statement, for you appear to be a pretty good sort of a man, and I did not believe you would say you could marry people if you did not have the proper authority."

"If any man believes that I am not telling the truth I will give him the name of the town where I last preached and the address of the bishop who presided over my district, so by writing a couple of letters the exact facts concerning me can be had."

"That statement ought to satisfy anybody," the sport declared. "It certainly does me."

And this was the truth. Blake had had his doubts as to whether the man could perform a legal marriage, but was inclined to the belief that every thing was all right, for he judged from what he had heard of Pauline Kemperwell that she was too sharp not to make sure the man was a regular minister before she had the ceremony performed, which united her to Jack Vanderhoven.

"You can rest assured that every thing is correct!" the old man affirmed.

"So, if you have an idea of getting married, just bring your girl along and I will tie the knot so tightly that nothing short of death or a divorce court will be able to loosen it."

"Oh, I haven't any notion of getting married," Blake replied.

The other looked surprised.

"Wherefore this questioning, then?"

"Just to satisfy my curiosity about the matter," Blake explained, with one of his quist smiles.

"You see, I heard of this Jack Vanderhoven affair, and I was wondering whether Pauline Kemperwell was legally married to the New Yorker or not," he continued.

"It was a perfectly legal marriage, if there ever was one in this world!" the old fellow declared, and he glanced at Blake in a peculiar way as he spoke; it was plain that his suspicions were excited.

"Nothing crooked about it, eh?"

"No, sir, nothing," the other replied, slowly, and he looked as though he was puzzled by the question.

"I am going to come right out and be honest with you about this matter," Blake remarked, in a brisk, business-like way.

"I represent certain parties who want to find out just what is the truth about the matter. They have a suspicion that there was something wrong. If the marriage was a legal one, was Jack Vanderhoven in a condition to know what he was doing when the ceremony was performed?"

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that," the dominie replied. "There were a couple of witnesses present, and they will bear evidence, in addition to my testimony, that the New Yorker was in full possession of his senses, and knew perfectly well what he was doing when he married Miss Kemperwell."

"Some witnesses don't amount to much, you know," Blake observed, in a careless way.

"There are always plenty of men in all camps of this kind who would be willing to swear to almost anything, provided they were paid enough for the service."

"Oh, yes, I understand all about that, but this thing is all straight—you can depend upon it!" the other asserted; but he spoke in a nervous way, as though the discussion worried him.

"If it is a question of money, you know, the people whom I represent have got plenty, and they will not be afraid to put it out, either," Blake declared.

"If there is anything crooked about this marriage, and it has been brought about by the use of money, then the men who have been led into the game by the prospect of making a stake can rest assured that they can make double, and treble even what they were originally promised by coming out and upsetting the crooked business."

The old fellow meditated over the matter for a few moments and then he shook his head.

"Oh, no, there isn't any question of money; everything was all straight," he replied.

"And then there is another point, my dear friend, which you have not taken into consideration," the dominie added. "And I will just give you a hint to put you on your guard. Mike Dufoy, who is running this thing, is a dangerous man, and if one of his associates should go back on him he might as well order his coffin."

Blake saw that it was useless to talk more, so he rose to his feet.

"Dangerous man, eh?" he said. "Those are just the kind of men that I like to look at, so I will see him as soon as possible."

Then the sport departed, leaving the old man considerably amazed.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE WOMAN SPEAKS.

BLAKE retraced his steps and fell meditating over the affair as he went on.

"The dominie was evidently a little annoyed by my visit, and in order to get square he threw out that little hint about the keeper of the Dewdrop Inn being a dangerous man."

"That was meant to remind me that I was poking my nose into a business which did not concern me, and that I might consider myself extremely lucky if I did not get into trouble."

"I think I played the game pretty well, although I did not succeed in taking a trick," the sport continued, after thinking the matter over for a few moments.

"If the marriage was the result of a conspiracy, and the minister went into it with the hope of making a good stake, I showed him that there was a chance for him to make more money by betraying his associates."

"He did not take the bait though, and from what he said it is evident that his fear of the vengeance that Mike Dufoy would be certain to take on any one who betrayed him is stronger than his avarice."

"So far as I can see the only crooked work there could have been in the affair was that it is possible Jack Vanderhoven did not know what he was about at the time of the marriage. The conspirators may have dosed him with liquor so that they would be able to do what they liked with him, but if this is the truth I doubt if it can be proven."

"Then again, I don't feel so sure that Vanderhoven did not know exactly what he was doing," the sport added, thoughtfully.

"According to all accounts he was a reckless, worthless kind of a fellow, one of the chaps who would just as lief make a fool of himself as not, and I think it was very probable that he did marry the girl, just as she states."

By this time Blake had reached the camp again and so he brought his muttered reflections to a close.

Straight to the Dewdrop Inn he proceeded. When he entered the saloon there were only a couple of miners in the place conversing with the man behind the bar, and from the description that the veteran sport had given of the barkeeper, George James, George, the Killer, as he was nick-named, Blake felt satisfied that the man behind the counter was the one who bore so terrible a cognomen.

The Fresh sauntered into the saloon in his airy, easy way, and as he approached the bar, took occasion to "size up" the barkeeper.

"Too much beef, old and stale—has, undoubtedly, been a pretty good man, but it was twenty years back," was the opinion that Blake reached.

The barkeeper stared at the sport.

Already the sport had become a noted man in the camp.

The story of how he had hammered the big Sioux chieftain into insensibility, and then killed the two warriors who had sought to avenge the defeat of their leader, had been widely circulated, and then his encounter with a big, black-bearded bully in the Pink Palace saloon had afforded a number of the citizens a chance to see with their own eyes just how good a man the new sport was.

The barkeeper was disappointed though when he got a good look at Blake, for he made the usual mistake of thinking the sport was a deal smaller than he really was.

Being a big, burly fellow himself his idea of world-beaters was that they ought to be great overgrown masses of flesh after his style.

"I should like to see Miss Kemperwell on a little matter of business," Blake said.

"I reckon you kin, but I will see," the bartender replied.

Then he went to the rear door, opened it and delivered the message.

In a few moments he returned.

"If you go through that door you'll find her," he remarked.

Blake nodded politely, and advanced into the entry, closing the door after him.

At the further end of the entry stood a female figure.

"This way, please," the woman said, in a high, shrill, but not unpleasant voice.

The sport proceeded along the entry and at the extreme end was ushered into a little sitting-room scantily furnished.

Furniture is almost worth its weight in gold in the far Western camps as it has to be freighted on mule back over the mountains.

The lady placed a chair and invited the sport to be seated, and as he took the chair she also sat down.

Pauline Kemperwell was a woman who was fully forty years old, but as she had always taken pretty good care of herself, and understood to perfection the art of "making up," and did not hesitate to aid and improve nature by daylight as well as when she was preparing to appear on the stage, she did not look to be a day over thirty.

She was a little slender woman, but with a good figure; her features were rather sharp, and she would have been called good looking if

it was not from a certain bold way which she possessed.

This was evidently the result of the peculiar sort of a public life which she had led.

The girl who sings on the stage in a mining-camp soon loses the modest, retiring way which is one of woman's greatest charms.

"My name is Blake," the sport explained.

"Yes, I am aware of that—in fact, I know all about you," Miss Kemperwell declared with an extremely pleasant smile.

"Well, that is lucky, for it saves me the trouble of introducing myself," the sport remarked.

"Yes, it is not necessary for you to go into any explanations, but I must say that I am very sorry that you concluded to take part against me," the woman remarked in a regretful way.

Despite his really wonderful assurance Blake was surprised by the speech.

"I don't suppose that you had any idea I understood all about this matter," Miss Kemperwell continued, before the sport could speak.

"No, it is something of a surprise."

"Well, you must take into consideration the fact that I am fighting a battle alone and single-handed," the woman declared, pressing her thin lips together in a resolute way.

"The people on the other side have plenty of money, the advantage of a good position—everything, almost, in their favor, you may say, and under these circumstances I must put forth all my energies—use all my woman's cunning or else I will not stand any chance of winning."

Blake nodded assent, for he was somewhat perplexed and did not know exactly what to make of the affair.

"And I will say to you very frankly, Mr. Blake, that under the circumstances I am very much distressed to find that a man like yourself has entered the lists against me."

"I am not at all afraid of the old lawyer; he is a good-natured, well-meaning, but dull sort of a man, and though he will do everything in his power to keep me from getting the money to which I am justly entitled, yet I do not think he is smart enough to succeed."

"So far I have met all his moves without any difficulty," the woman continued, with a triumphant expression on her resolute features.

"When he asked for time in New York, so that he could examine into the matter, and said, in his smooth, oily way that he had an impression that my claim was a just one, I understood just what kind of a game he was going to play." And the woman's lip curled in contempt as she made the remark.

"Despite all his smooth words he did not care the snap of his finger whether my claim was just or unjust; he did not intend that I should get the money if he could possibly keep me out of it, no matter whether I was entitled to it or not."

"I promptly put a spy on his track, and so was able to discover that he, in company with Miss Vanderhoven, intended to make a Western trip, and I guessed at once that they were coming to this camp, with the idea of trying to discover some flaw in my statement."

"This fact did not cause me any uneasiness," the woman continued, with a defiant toss of her head. "For I felt sure that they would not be able to accomplish anything."

"I was on my guard, though, and took the precaution to have the old lawyer closely watched."

"When it was reported to me that Mr. De Witt and yourself were holding consultations, I immediately suspected that he had made some arrangement with you, for I knew that he had sense enough to understand that a man like himself could not hope to do much of anything in a camp like this."

"From this disclosure it is very evident that the old lawyer is no match for you," the sport remarked, with a smile.

"I am fighting for a great stake, and I should be very foolish indeed if I did not do all in my power to win!" Miss Kemperwell replied.

"Yes, that is true."

"Then when I became satisfied that you had indeed become an agent of my enemies, I put a spy on you, and so know that you have just come from the dominie's cabin, and I understand what passed between you just as well as though I had been present and listened to the conversation."

The sport laughed outright.

"Well, you are a fighter, and no mistake," he declared.

"You can not find a flaw in my story, and I don't care how earnestly you look!" the woman exclaimed.

"I am Jack Vanderhoven's wife; the marriage was a legal one, and I defy anybody to prove that it was not so!"

"You certainly seem to have a strong case," the sport remarked, slowly, and in a reflective way.

"Yes, and I must win, for justice is on my side!" she replied.

"And come now, Mr. Blake, I ask you as a fair man, do you consider it right for this rich Miss Vanderhoven to bother herself about this matter, and use her money to keep me out of what belongs to me?"

"There are wheels within wheels, you know," the sport replied. "And it is sometimes hard to fathom the motives of humans, particular of the female persuasion."

"It is certainly a fact that Miss Vanderhoven is taking a good deal of trouble about the matter, and for no particular reason as far as any one can see, but I learned from the old lawyer that once there was sort of a love affair between this rich young woman and Jack Vanderhoven; his wildness put an end to it, but it is possible that there is a good deal of the old feeling in the young lady's heart, and so she looks upon you as a rival who took the man she fancied and in revenge she is going to do all she can to keep you from getting his money."

Miss Kemperwell sat with downcast eyes and reflected upon the matter for a few moments, then with a half sigh she said:

"I think it is probable you have hit on the truth."

"I am a woman, too, and under like circumstances I think I would follow just about the same course."

"But as you have such a strong case this little bit of female vengeance will not be apt to bother you much," Blake observed.

The woman shook her head.

"I am not so sure about that," she said in a doubtful way. "She has plenty of money while I am poor—reduced in fact to sing in this dive so that I can get money to live."

"I don't pretend, Mr. Blake, to be any better than I ought to be," she continued with a plainly perceptible tinge of bitterness in her tone.

"But for a woman who has passed through the experience—the trials and vicissitudes that I have and yet kept herself respectable, the world should have some regard although I know that it is folly to expect anything of the kind."

"I have always tried to do as near right as I knew how, although at times I have been so situated that it was a hard matter for me to resist temptation. Now in this case, here was this New Yorker making a fool of himself in the camp here. I was singing in this saloon and he became infatuated with me right away."

"I will admit that I liked the man well enough, for he was a gentleman and a nice fellow, when his brain wasn't turned with liquor, but I laughed at him when he began to talk about marrying me."

"At last, though, when he was taken sick—he had left the Pink Palace and come over here for a room the day before—I had a suspicion that he was breaking up, and as this saloon, with its noisy gang, was no place for a sick man, I made arrangements with the dominie for the use of his cabin and had him taken there."

"And then, when it was apparent that he hadn't many hours to live, and he begged me to marry him as the only payment he could make me for the cure I had taken of him, saying that as his widow there would be money for me in the East, I consented."

"Now you have the truth, and I ask you, Mr. Blake, do you think that it is fair for a man like yourself—a man of the world—a sport—to join hands with a woman like this rich Miss Vanderhoven, who is worth I don't know how many millions, against a daughter of Bohemia, a child of the footlights, such as I am?"

Blake shook his head; the words of the woman, so straightforward and directly to the point, had impressed him.

"No; you are right. I am on the wrong side," he remarked.

"A man like myself ought not to be bought with a little money like a common, every-day detective, who is always ready to serve whoever can afford to pay him."

"But I have not done you any damage," he continued. "So far as my examination has gone, it has been favorable for you."

"The only weak point in the case as far as I can see is this—were you free to marry when you were united to Vanderhoven?"

"I understand!" the woman exclaimed, with a confident smile. "We stage-ladies are not always as particular about getting divorced from our husbands, if we find it necessary to separate from them, as we might be."

"This is only a supposition of mine, you understand," the sport explained.

"I have not discovered anything in relation to the matter."

"Oh, yes, I comprehend that, for it would not be possible for you, or anybody else, to make any discovery of the kind."

"I have been married twice, the first time when I was a mere child to a minstrel performer known as Billy Kemperwell, and after my marriage he put me and my younger sister on the stage under the name of the Kemperwell sisters, and the three of us traveled together for a long time."

"Ten years ago he died of consumption, a common cause of death among the song and dance men."

"My sister married and retired from the stage so I was forced to keep on alone."

"A year ago I met Dick Dufey, a brother of the man who keeps this place."

"Although he was a gambler, yet he was a

very nice fellow, and for the second time in my life I fell in love."

"We were married and he came to this town and opened this place with his brother; a month later he was killed by a random bullet."

"Now you have the history of my life, and I give you my word I have told you nothing but the truth."

"I believe you!" Blake exclaimed.

He had been keeping close watch upon the woman's face while she had been telling her story, and fancied he had experience enough in the human face divine to decide from the expression upon the features whether the speaker was telling the truth or not.

"And now, Mr. Blake, I will make you a good offer," Miss Kemperwell said in an earnest way.

"Although I know that I have right and justice on my side, yet I am afraid to have a man like yourself opposed to me and I would much rather have you on my side than against me."

"You understand, I presume, that if I win I will not be able to retain all the money," she continued.

"These three men whose testimony is so valuable to me have got to be paid, and they expect to be paid well, too, for they know that I depend upon them, and they understand that without their testimony I could not possibly win."

"That is true enough, but I don't see as that is any reason why they should expect you to pay them any large sum."

"I am to give them five hundred dollars apiece."

The sport gave a low whistle, indicative of great astonishment.

"Why, this is sheer, down-right robbery!" Blake declared.

"Yes, I know that I ought not to pay them any such sum, but under the circumstances what can I do?" the woman asked.

"Without their evidence I could not hope to prove that I was really married to Jack Vanderhoven, and they take advantage of that fact to make me pay them a big price."

"They are a set of robbers, and if you will be guided by my advice you will not pay them any such money!" Blake exclaimed.

"Five hundred dollars!" he continued with growing indignation.

"Well, well, upon my word! if this don't beat anything that I ever heard of in all my experience!"

"Bah! if they get ten dollars apiece they would be well paid. And one of them is your brother-in-law, too."

"Yes, but all he thinks of is money," the woman explained. "He is entirely different from his brother who married me."

"But to return to what I was about to say, if you will stop playing the detective on me I will give you five hundred dollars, too, just the same as I am to give them."

"That is a very good offer for me, but a very foolish one for you to make," Blake replied immediately.

"If your story is true, and most certainly I am inclined to the belief that it is, it is not possible for me to place any obstacles in your way, even if I was disposed to do my level best in that direction."

"Mr. Blake, it would be a difficult task for me to explain to you just how anxious I am to obtain this money!" the woman exclaimed in a tremulous voice. "It means life to me, I am so heartily sick of the wretched existence which I have been forced to lead since the death of Dick Dufey, and I am satisfied that I would rather die than continue such a miserable life!"

"I think this affair can be arranged," the sport remarked, after deliberating over the matter for a few moments.

"Suppose I contrive a meeting between you and Miss Vanderhoven, so that you will have a chance to tell her your story just as you have told it to me?"

"I should think that would be a good idea," the woman replied.

"With the lady herself I have not had any conversation, so I am not able to say how she regards the matter," Blake remarked.

"And as for the old lawyer I think it is probable that when he talked with me about the affair he merely expressed his own idea. It is more than likely, you know, that Miss Vanderhoven has allowed the old gentleman to go ahead in his own way."

"Yes, that is true."

"If you will come up to the hotel in half an hour I think I can have matters so arranged that you can see Miss Vanderhoven, and really, you know, a family matter like this ought not to be settled by a lot of lawyers; the parties themselves ought to get together and arrange the affair," Blake remarked, rising to his feet.

"Yes, I should think so."

"And if the affair is settled up in that way you will not have to pay these three robbers any five hundred dollars apiece."

"They will be fearfully angry if I do not pay it," Miss Kemperwell declared.

"Oh, don't let that bother you! If they don't like to take a fair price just turn the matter over to me and see if I don't manage the affair

so that they will be glad to take whatever I choose to give," the sport remarked in his easy, careless way, and then he departed.

Hardly had the sound of his footfalls died away in the entry when in through the rear door of the apartment came the keeper of the Dewdrop Inn Saloon, Mike Dufoy.

Mike Dufoy was a big, muscular fellow, with a dark, ugly face.

The moment that the man made his appearance, the woman understood that he had played the listener.

This was a complete surprise to her, for she supposed that Dufoy had gone up the gulch on business.

The man took the seat which Blake had just vacated, and glared at Miss Kemperwell in an ugly way.

"Going to throw us over?" he exclaimed.

"You have been acting the part of a spy, eh?" she questioned, with a look full of contempt.

"I reckon that I heard a little of your talk."

"You ought to know, then, that you are not correct when you say that I am going to throw you over."

"That is what that dandy sport advised, though!" the saloon-keeper retorted, in a savage way.

"Did I say that I was going to do it?" she exclaimed, impulsively.

"No, but you didn't say that you wasn't going to, either!"

"By rights, though, I ought not to pay such a sum of money if I succeed in getting my claim allowed without your help," the woman argued.

"Yes, but if it wasn't for the fact that we three are prepared to give our testimony in your favor, I reckon you would not be able to make any arrangement with these people!" the saloon-keeper declared.

"That is possible, of course, still the service that you are able to render is not worth the sum that you demand," Miss Kemperwell replied.

"Well, that is just what you are going to pay, and you might as well make up your mind to it first as last."

"You would never have thought of kicking over the traces if it had not been for this dandy sport," the saloon-keeper continued, his tone full of anger.

"But I will arrange things so as to fix his hash for him! I will give him a warning to mind his own business, which will be apt to last him for one while!"

And with this threat, Mike Dufoy took his departure.

The woman was not alarmed, for she had confidence that the sport would be able to take care of himself.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BLAKE'S DECISION.

AFTER leaving the saloon, Blake proceeded directly to the hotel.

It was only across the street, but the sport had time to think over a plan of action before he entered the Pink Palace.

"I had better see Miss Vanderhoven and have a talk right with her," he mused.

"And now the question comes up—is it wise for me to attempt to bring the two women together?"

Then he shook his head as though he did not feel at all sure about this point.

"Women are queer creatures, and the man who thinks he can decide in advance just how they will act under certain conditions, generally discovers before the affair is ended that he has made the biggest kind of a mistake."

"I must manage the matter without the interference of the old lawyer, for I am satisfied that he will only make a botch of it."

Just then he happened to raise his eyes, and saw Miss Vanderhoven sitting at one of the parlor windows.

"I don't see the old gentleman," the sport soliloquized, as he raised his hat and bowed in response to the lady's smiling salutation.

"And if he is out of the way I had better improve the opportunity, for it may be some time before I get another chance."

As Blake entered the hotel he encountered the landlord, and upon inquiring of him in regard to the whereabouts of Mr. De Witt, received the pleasing information that the old gentleman had set out to inspect the mines.

"I will have a chance to talk a little business then with Miss Vanderhoven without his being able to interfere," Blake remarked.

"The old man means well, but he is a back number and not at all up to the times," the sport added.

"Oh, yes, he is a decided old fogey. There is no mistake about that."

"He means well, but is no more fit to manage an affair of this kind than I am to run a steam-engine."

"That is true, and it is something of a wonder too that he had sense enough to understand that the thing was too much for him, and got you to take hold."

"When he got out here and saw what kind of people he would have to deal with he weakened on the job."

"And no wonder!" Doc Slater exclaimed.

"But I say, how did you get on? Find everything about as I said?"

"Yes, your statements were all correct, and as far as I can see the woman has a good case," the sport replied.

"That is about the way it looks to me."

"There is no doubt that she was legally married to Jack Vanderhoven, and although it is very possible that she would not have married him if she had not thought that he came of a wealthy family and there would be a chance for her to come in for something handsome, yet that doesn't amount to anything."

"I reckon not!" Doc Slater exclaimed, emphatically. "If a row was kicked up about all the women who got married solely because they thought they could make money out of the operation there would be a heap of trouble in this world."

"She claims to be a decent, respectable woman, although she is obliged to get her living by singing in a saloon which isn't any better than it ought to be."

"Well, I reckon that statement is correct," the landlord remarked, after reflecting upon the matter for a few moments.

"I must do her the justice to say that I never heard a word against her since she has been in the town."

"And she claims that Vanderhoven ran after her just as soon as he came to the camp."

"That is true too; the fellow was completely infatuated."

"And then when he fell sick and had no place to go, she hired a cabin so as to be able to take care of him."

"That is correct! There is no getting away from the fact that she treated the man white all the way through!" Doc Slater declared, emphatically.

"Of course it may have been all a game on her part to get the man to marry her, but if she speaks the truth about his infatuation it would not have required much planning on her part to bring about such a result."

"That is a fact; the man was clean-gone on her."

"It is my opinion though, you know, that the fellow was so soaked in liquor that he did not know what he was about nine-tenths of the time," the landlord added.

"But that is a thing that is not easy to prove, and her claims are all right as far as that is concerned."

"I thought perhaps that she might be tripped up on some old-time husband, but when I suggested it to her she replied promptly that she was a free woman when she married Vanderhoven."

"Well, she ought to know," the veteran sport responded with a grin.

"That is true enough."

"I have been thinking over this matter since you have been gone," Doc Slater remarked.

"And I have come to the conclusion that it is a rather mean thing for a wealthy woman, such as the old lawyer describes this Miss Vanderhoven to be, to make such a fight to keep another woman out of a good stake, particularly when, if I understand the matter rightly, the money does not come out of her at all."

"It doesn't."

"Well, pard, I reckon you must admit that it is not just the square thing."

"As near as I can find out this Miss Vanderhoven had an idea of marrying this man, Jack, herself at one time."

"Ah, yes, I see; that explains the matter," the landlord affirmed with a sagacious nod.

"There is a little bit of feminine jealousy in the thing. It annoys her to think that another woman got the man she once fancied."

"Yes, that is the way it appears to me," Blake observed.

"I don't exactly know how it will suit her, but I am going to make my report to her now and recommend that some sort of a compromise be made, giving it as my opinion, from the investigation I have made, that this Miss Kemperwell has a perfectly good claim."

"I reckon she will not like it," Doc Slater suggested.

"It is not my fault if the report is not a favorable one," the sport replied. "I went in to find out the truth, and if it is not pleasant I am not to blame."

Then Blake proceeded up-stairs.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE INTERVIEW.

MISS VANDERHOVEN received the sport with a gracious smile, and invited him to be seated, an invitation which the Fresh accepted with a polite bow.

The sport proceeded at once to business, saying:

"I have made a careful investigation into this affair, and I think I have found out all that can be discovered."

"You have certainly acted with great promptness," the young lady remarked.

"Well, in a matter of this kind, when there is nothing to be gained by delay, I believe in going ahead as quickly as possible."

And then Blake related all the particulars of

his interviews with the dominie and Miss Kemperwell.

The young lady listened with the utmost attention, her face grave and earnest.

"Have you arrived at any opinion in regard to the matter?" she asked, in a slow, reflective way.

"Oh, yes; do you care to hear it?"

"If you will be so kind. You see, Mr. Blake, I place a great deal of dependence upon your judgment. You are a man of the world, and I feel sure that your opinion will be valuable."

"As to that, of course, it is not for me to say, but you are quite welcome to it, such as it is," the sport responded.

"I should judge from your manner that you have formed a favorable opinion of this person's claim."

"Yes, that is true."

"You do not think then that my cousin was the victim of a conspiracy?"

"No, I cannot find any evidence going to prove such a thing."

"According to all the testimony, your cousin became infatuated with this Miss Kemperwell as soon as he saw her, and it was he that ran after her, not she after him, and up to the time that he was taken sick she did not do anything to encourage him; then she took care of the sufferer, and finally allowed him to persuade her to become his wife; doubtless his stories of the money which would come to her if anything should happen to him had weight, but, really, under the circumstances, it was only natural that it should."

"Yes, I presume so," Miss Vanderhoven observed, slowly.

"Perhaps I have judged this woman too harshly," she continued.

"I imagined that when such a woman, as I imagined her to be, saw a chance to secure so large a sum as ten thousand dollars, she would not hesitate at any means to gain it."

"Well, in this case, most certainly it was the man who did the wooing, and not the woman," Blake declared.

"And I will further say that this Miss Kemperwell was taking big chances when she consented to marry your cousin, for although he told large stories about the wealth that his family possessed, no one knew whether there was any truth in them or not, and, personally, he had sunk almost to the level of a common drunkard, so if he had not died, this woman would have been pretty certain to have led a dreadful life with him."

"It is terrible to think that poor Jack should have gone so utterly to the bad," Miss Vanderhoven exclaimed, with a shudder.

"Yes, it is not pleasant for me to have to make such a report, but you desire to know the truth, of course."

"Certainly, and I wish above all things that you should deal frankly with me."

"Oh, I will do that!" Blake exclaimed, quickly.

"Well, under these circumstances, what would you advise me to do?" Miss Vanderhoven asked, slowly.

"Admit the woman's claim, and have the affair settled up as quietly as possible."

"Your advice is exactly contrary to the opinion of Mr. De Witt," the young lady remarked.

"He was speaking about the matter just before he went out, and he said that it was his advice that the claim should not be paid, for it was his opinion that, no matter how fair a showing the woman presented, poor Jack had been the victim of a conspiracy."

"He talked to me about the same, and I understand his idea," the sport observed.

"You have plenty of money and the woman hasn't got any, so he relies upon the fact that it is not a difficult matter employing smart lawyers, and being willing to spend plenty of cash, to keep a suit of this kind in abeyance, until the patience and money of the protesting party are exhausted."

"Yes, I did not ask him to explain at length, but from what he said I think it was his idea to act in some such way."

"Well, he is an old and experienced lawyer, and ought to be far more capable than a man like myself to give good advice in an affair of this kind," Blake remarked, reflectively.

"But notwithstanding that fact, I think he is decidedly wrong in giving any such advice, and it is a strange fact too that old and experienced lawyers very often do make just such mistakes."

"Now, just consider; what will you make by fighting the claim?"

"De Witt may argue that as the woman is poor she will not be able to get the money to carry on a long lawsuit."

"But as far as that goes you can take my word that he has made a big mistake."

"Where the stake is so large a sum, and the claim of the claimant is so good, she will not find any difficulty in finding plenty of lawyers who will be glad to take the claim on shares."

"Yes, I have heard of such things being done," Miss Vanderhoven remarked, thoughtfully.

"She will not find any difficulty in making some arrangement of the kind."

"And then here is another point which I don't

believe Mr. De Witt has taken into consideration," the sport continued.

"Just think of the amount of talk which a suit of this kind will occasion," Blake urged.

"All the particulars of your cousin's life will be made public, and if I were in your position, possessing plenty of money, I would rather pay twice ten thousand dollars than to give the affair to the world."

A shade came over Miss Vanderhoven's face, and she shook her head in an earnest way.

"Oh, it would be dreadful!" she exclaimed.

"It would not be pleasant, that is sure," the sport declared.

"And, you see, all these things have to be considered before you make up your mind."

"Suppose you see Miss Kemperwell and have a talk with her," the Fresh suggested. "I think you will find that she is a great deal different from what you think. I must admit that she surprised me."

"She is a woman who has had a hard time of it, and, as a natural result, her battle with the world has made her somewhat coarse and bold, but her heart seems to be in the right place, and I really believe that the woman means to do as nearly right as she knows how."

"She has evidently made a favorable impression upon you," Miss Vanderhoven remarked, with a smile.

"I will have to admit that she did," Blake replied. "And the impression which I had formed of her in advance was a decidedly unfavorable one, too, but I always try to be fair in all cases of this kind, and so I was able to do the woman justice."

"And that is only right, too," the young lady declared with an approving nod.

"My idea was that a conspiracy existed, and when I came to examine into the matter I found that there was a conspiracy indeed, but it was directed against this Miss Kemperwell, not by her."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the girl, in amazement.

"Yes, these three witnesses who can testify in regard to both the marriage and death, had banded together and demanded that the woman should pay them five hundred dollars apiece for their valuable evidence."

"What a monstrous outrage!" Miss Vanderhoven declared, indignantly.

"That is about what I said, and I told the party that she must not pay any such sum."

"Well, if we arrange the matter quietly, and without a suit, she will not need their evidence, and then she need not pay the rogues anything."

"That was my counsel."

"It is just!"

"Will you see the lady, and announce to her that you will not dispute her claim?"

"Well—yes; if you think it best," the young lady replied, a little reluctantly.

"I think it would be the wisest way to arrange the matter. You can have Mr. De Witt present and allow him to do the talking—perhaps that will be more agreeable to you?"

"Yes, and then I want to get away from here as soon as I can," Miss Vanderhoven declared, abruptly.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A PROMISE.

BLAKE was not surprised when the young lady expressed herself in this fashion.

To a cultivated young woman from the East there was not much that could be attractive about a rude, wild, Western mining-camp.

"Well the scenery is picturesque, but that is about all that can be said in favor of this place," the sport remarked.

"Yes, but one soon tires of that, and the majority of the people here are such rude, wretched creatures!" Miss Vanderhoven declared, with an expression of profound disgust upon her handsome features.

"They certainly are not remarkable for either their looks, intelligence or manners."

"Mr. Blake, it is a mystery to me how a man like yourself can be content to remain in such a miserable place as this mining-camp!" the girl exclaimed, abruptly.

"Oh, well, I am not the only man here who appears as if he was fit for something better," the sport replied with a smile.

"I suppose that is true," Miss Vanderhoven observed, musingly. "You are far better calculated to judge than I, and you ought to know. Still, I must say that since I have been in the town I have not seen but two or three men who would be likely to prove congenial associates for a man like yourself."

"You are about right in that surmise," the Fresh admitted.

"But you must understand that I do not come to a place like this for the sake of enjoying the delights of society, but entirely as a matter of business," he continued.

The girl nodded.

"This is a flourishing camp, the miners are making plenty of money, and therefore it is a good place for me to locate for a while. I am a wolf, you know, and must go where I can find my prey," the sport remarked in a cheerful way and with a pleasant smile.

Miss Vanderhoven shook her head and a grave expression appeared on her features.

"I do not like to hear you talk in that way!" she declared!

"Yes, but it is the truth, and I always try to stick to the truth as far as possible. Then, too, as you have honored me with your confidence, I should not consider it right to attempt to deceive you in any way."

"Oh, I know all about you, Mr. Blake!" the girl exclaimed.

"Really, is that possible?" the sport asked, somewhat surprised at the declaration.

"Yes, the housekeeper this morning gave me a history of your career, and she made you out to be quite a hero."

"A good story seldom loses anything in the telling," Blake responded, dryly.

"She declared though that what she said was the truth," Miss Vanderhoven persisted.

"Well, a good story-teller is never willing to admit, you know, that there is any fiction in the narrative."

"Oh, I feel sure that about all she said was the truth," the young lady observed.

"You see, Mr. Blake, you are not altogether a stranger to me, and as I am satisfied that you are a remarkable man, I am quite ready to believe a number of wonderful tales about you."

"Now you are indulging in considerable flattery," the sport declared with a laugh.

"Oh, no! I think I am a good judge of mankind, and I am sure I have not made any mistake about you."

"But the wonder to me is that a man like yourself can be satisfied to lead the life that you do," Miss Vanderhoven added.

"Well, men get into ruts in this world and then it is hard work to get out," the sport remarked in a reflective way.

"And then, too, I am an odd fish; this wild life of adventure suits me, and I doubt if I would be content to lead any other."

"But if you got the chance would you not make the attempt?" the young lady asked, a trace of eagerness visible in her tones.

"I don't really think that it would be of any use," the sport replied.

"It is a very hard task, you see, to teach old dogs new tricks."

"Oh, I am satisfied that if you made the attempt you would succeed!" Miss Vanderhoven declared, manifesting a strange interest in the subject.

"The only trouble, as far as I see, will be for you to get the proper place," she continued, in a thoughtful way.

"A man like yourself, full of action and energy, would never be satisfied with a quiet, humdrum occupation."

"Yes, you are right about that," Blake admitted, considerably impressed by the girl's shrewdness.

"But there are plenty of chances which I feel sure would suit a man like yourself!" Miss Vanderhoven declared. "And all these peculiar gifts of yours, which have enabled you to make so great a name in these wild, rude mining-camps, would be of equal service in another kind of life."

"No doubt!"

"Come, now, Mr. Blake, I have taken a great interest in you, and I want you to promise me that you will try to lead a different kind of life from the one you are now following," she said, in the most earnest manner possible.

"I must wait until the chance comes along," the sport replied.

"And when it does come will you take it?" the girl asked eagerly.

"Oh, yes, I don't mind giving you that promise," Blake replied, smilingly.

"Particularly as the chances are great that no opportunity, such as you describe, will come in my way," he added.

"I am not at all troubled in regard to that," Miss Vanderhoven declared, with a peculiar smile upon her handsome, resolute face.

"Is that a fact?" the sport queried in surprise.

"Do you feel certain, then, that a favorable opportunity will come in in my way?"

"Oh, yes, I am quite positive about the matter, for I shall make it my business to look out for a suitable position for you."

"Upon my word! (you surprise me!)" the Fresh exclaimed, amazed by this disclosure.

"I am a woman, and it is my sex's privilege, you know, to become possessed of all kinds of odd whims," the young lady remarked, with a charming smile.

"Oh, yes, ladies are entitled to indulge in strange fancies."

"The explanation in this is simple enough," Miss Vanderhoven remarked.

"You are so entirely different from any gentleman I have ever encountered that I have come to take a great interest in you, and as I am satisfied that if you have a good opportunity you will make a great name for yourself I have made up my mind to do all in my power to afford you the chance."

"Really you will place me under an overpowering sense of obligation," the sport declared.

"Oh, no, you must not look at the matter in that way," the young lady replied, quickly.

"I am rich—really have more money than I know what to do with, and in looking for a suitable occupation for you, I may be able to find an opportunity to use some of my surplus funds so that the money will be a benefit to the world at large."

Miss Vanderhoven spoke in the most earnest manner, and it was plain that she was deeply interested in the subject.

"Yes, there is a possibility that you can succeed in your endeavor, and although when I gave you the promise, I had no idea that I would be called upon to fulfill it, yet I will hold to my word," the sport remarked.

"Very well, I am glad to hear you make that declaration, and I feel sure that it will not be long before I will find an opportunity where you will be able to show your good qualities."

"Peace has its victories as well as war, you know, and there are plenty of opportunities in the ranks of commerce for the right kind of men to show that they were designed for great leaders."

"I will do my best to deserve your good opinion when the time comes, and I hope that I shall not disappoint you," Blake remarked.

He had no idea that anything would come of this affair, and merely gave the promise in order to please the girl.

It was but a whim on her part, and after she returned to her Eastern home, and again entered the whirl of society, it was his idea that she would not trouble herself any more about the matter.

"Oh, I feel sure that you will not!" Miss Vanderhoven exclaimed in a voice full of confidence.

"And now, shall I send for Miss Kemperwell?" Blake asked.

"I suppose the quicker the affair is settled the better."

"Yes, you are right. There is no longer any need for delay," the lady replied. "As soon as we come to an understanding with her I will be able to depart, and I can assure you I shall be heartily glad to get away from this dreadful place."

"I don't doubt it, and I don't wonder that you should not be anxious to remain any longer than is absolutely necessary."

"I will send for the lady, and you can expect her in about ten minutes," Blake said, as he took his departure.

There was a half-grown boy lounging in front of the Pink Palace, and the sport hired him to carry the message to Miss Kemperwell.

The boy returned in a few moments with the answer that the lady would come right over.

Blake did not have long to wait, for soon Miss Kemperwell made her appearance.

"Miss Vanderhoven is waiting to see you, and all is arranged in a satisfactory manner," the sport announced when he met the woman at the door.

"I am so glad!" Pauline exclaimed in a thankful manner. "It takes a great weight from my mind."

"I had very little trouble in convincing the young lady that it would be far better to settle the matter quietly than to allow the lawyers to wrangle and fight about it."

"Yes, yes, for then the truth would come out about the kind of life that Jack led during the two or three years that preceded his death, and it would be very unpleasant."

"Decidedly so!" Blake exclaimed, as he led the way up the stairs.

"But there will not be any trouble now."

Then the sport ushered Miss Kemperwell into the presence of Miss Vanderhoven and introduced the two.

The women surveyed each other with curious glances.

Then the rich young lady said in a very polite but rather cold tone.

"I regret that I did not see you in New York, Mrs. Vanderhoven, for I think that if we had met we could have settled this business without any trouble, but the lawyers thought it wise to keep us apart."

"That was policy on their part," Blake observed. "These legal gentlemen thrive on contention, and if people got in the habit of coming together, and settling their disputes without taking the advice of the legal sharks, their occupation would be gone."

From the fact that Miss Vanderhoven addressed her by her married name Pauline understood that the wealthy young lady was prepared to accept her as her cousin's widow.

"Of course I would much rather settle the matter quietly," Pauline observed.

"That was my idea when I came East to see Mr. De Witt," she continued. "But from the way he received me I saw that it was not possible for me to get along without consulting a lawyer."

"We will not trouble the legal gentlemen any more in the matter," Miss Vanderhoven declared, shortly.

"I presume Mr. De Witt will be amazed when he learns that you have decided to settle the matter without a contest," the sport observed.

"Yes, it is possible, but the old gentleman understands me pretty well, and he knows that

when I make up my mind to follow a certain course I rarely allow anything to turn me from it," the young lady replied with great firmness.

"How soon can you be prepared to start for the East?" she asked, turning to Pauline.

"As soon as you like, and the quicker we go the better I shall like it," was the reply.

"There isn't any reason why I should wish to stay in this place and I shall be heartily glad to get out of it."

"Very well, as soon as Mr. De Witt comes I will instruct him to make the necessary preparations for our departure."

"We will not be able to go until to-morrow, for the coach will not arrive until this evening," Pauline remarked.

"Indeed! I am sorry for that, for I would have liked to have got away to-day, still a day is not long to wait."

"Oh, no, the hours slip away quickly enough," the sport observed.

"I have my trunk all packed in anticipation of a departure," Pauline affirmed. "And I shall send over and have it brought to the hotel, as I do not intend to return to my former abode again."

"Mike Dufoy played the spy upon our interview, Mr. Blake, and he was very angry when he discovered that there was a chance I would be able to get my money without being obliged to depend upon his assistance."

"That is not surprising," the sport remarked. "A man of the Mike Dufoy stamp does not get a chance to pick up a sum like five hundred dollars every day of his life, and it is no wonder that he is angry when he finds out there is a possibility of the cash slipping through his fingers."

"And he blames you because he thinks that if you had not interfered in the matter he would have got the money," Pauline explained.

"Well, my shoulders are broad, and I reckon I will be able to bear the burden without much trouble," the Fresh replied with a pleasant smile.

"The man must be a miserable wretch or else he would never have dreamed of making any such demand upon you!" Miss Vanderhoven declared.

"Oh, he is a first-class rascal; there isn't any doubt about that!" Blake asserted.

"And you must be on your guard, Mr. Blake, for he blames you in the matter," Pauline warned.

"Oh, he does?"

"Yes, he overheard you tell me that I ought not to pay any such sum as five hundred dollars, and he vows to have vengeance upon you for giving me such counsel."

"There is an old saying that threatened men live long, you know," the sport answered, not manifesting the least concern in regard to the intelligence.

"But you must be on your guard," Pauline declared. "For I feel sure that he will do you a mischief if he can."

"Yes, Mr. Blake, you will surely heed this warning?" Miss Vanderhoven asked, anxiously. "You can trust me to keep my eyes open," the sport declared.

"I have not been in the town long enough to find out just what kind of a man this Mike Dufoy is, but when any man makes threats against me I always make it a rule to believe that he is extremely dangerous until I discover to the contrary."

"By acting in this way, you see, I never make the mistake of underrating an opponent."

"He is a vile, bad man!" Pauline exclaimed.

"But as a foe he is not so dangerous as his barkeeper, who bears the name of George, the Killer!"

"George, the Killer, eh?"

"So he is called."

"Well, that is certainly a bloodthirsty name; and he is the big fellow behind the bar?"

"Yes; he is reputed to be one of the most dangerous men in the town," the woman affirmed.

"He looks like a tough customer."

"And when Mike Dufoy gets the message to send my trunk over to the Pink Palace, and so learns that I do not intend to return to his place, he will be sure to suspect that he does not stand any chance of getting the five hundred dollars, and his rage will be unbounded."

"Very likely," Blake observed.

"And he will certainly blame you."

"I will be ready for him; just write me an order for your trunk, and I will attend to it."

Pauline did so, and then the sport took his departure.

CHAPTER XXXII.

BLAKE MEANS BUSINESS.

WHEN Blake entered the saloon, he found the old lawyer in conversation with the landlord.

"How is this, Mr. Blake? Mr. Slater tells me that this woman, who claims to be Jack Vanderhoven's widow, is up-stairs with Miss Arabella!" the old gentleman exclaimed, evidently much astonished.

"Yes, that is correct," the sport replied.

"Well, how does such a thing come to be?" Mr. De Witt asked.

"The explanation is simple enough," Blake answered. "I made a careful examination into the case, and soon satisfied myself that the woman's claim was a just one, and so I advised Miss Vanderhoven to settle the matter quietly."

"After she had heard my explanation, she came to the conclusion that my advice was good, and so sent for this Miss Kemperwell, as she has called herself, but who will be known as Mrs. Vanderhoven in the future."

"Bless me!" exclaimed Mr. De Witt, "it seems to me that this was all very sudden, but then Miss Arabella was always impulsive."

"I hope that everything will come out all right," the old gentleman continued, with a grave shake of the head, by means of which he wished his listeners to understand that he had grave fears in regard to it.

"Oh, yes, I reckon there isn't any doubt about that," the sport answered, in his easy, careless way.

"I have managed to get myself into a mess though, by engineering the thing," he added.

"How so?" asked Doc Slater.

"I had an interview with the lady in the saloon across the street, and when I found that the three witnesses who were going to testify for her expected a big stake, I advised her not to submit to be robbed; this Mike Dufoy was listening, it seems, and after I had gone he told the woman that he was going to get square with me for interfering in the matter."

"Bless my soul! did anybody ever hear of anything like that?" the old lawyer exclaimed.

"He is an ugly customer, Blake, and you will have to keep your eyes peeled," the landlord warned in a serious tone.

"Oh, you can depend upon it that I shall not allow them to catch me napping!" the sport declared.

"Mike Dufoy himself, although an ugly customer enough, is not half so bad as his barkeeper, who bears the reputation of being a holy terror," said the host.

"George, the Killer, eh?"

"Yes, that is what he is called," Doc Slater replied.

"A most extraordinary appellation upon my word!" the old lawyer exclaimed.

"Mrs. Vanderhoven is going to depart for the East to-morrow with your young lady," the sport remarked to the lawyer. "And she has made up her mind to remain here until she goes, so she gave me an order to get her trunk," and Blake exhibited the bit of paper.

Doc Slater shook his head.

"You think there will be trouble about getting the property?" the sport observed.

"The odds are a hundred to one that there will be!" the host declared, emphatically.

"That is just about what I think," Blake remarked in a calm, judicial way.

"Why, surely this man will not dare to attempt to detain the property when you have a written order for it?" Mr. De Witt questioned.

"The moment the demand is made for the trunk he will understand that the game is up as far as his getting any big stake out of the affair is concerned; therefore he will be certain to be angry, and will be inclined to do all in his power to be ugly," Doc Slater argued.

"I reckon that you have figured the thing out about right," Blake declared.

"To the same conclusion I came, and when Mrs. Vanderhoven told me that this ruffian had threatened to make this camp too hot to hold me, I made up my mind that the quicker I gave Mike Dufoy, and his barkeeper, a chance to show just how good men they were the better."

"You are right there; when a thing of that sort comes on the carpet the quicker it is settled the better!" the veteran sport affirmed.

The old lawyer looked from one to the other in astonishment.

"Really, Mr. Slater, you don't think that Mr. Blake ought to go out of his way on purpose to meet these ruffians?" Mr. De Witt questioned in amazement.

"Why, yes, of course; so long as he expects to meet them he better get the thing off his mind as soon as possible."

"The gentleman doesn't understand the way we Westerners work a game of this kind," the sport remarked.

"You see, Mr. De Witt, the man has sent me warning that he means business, and if I am not disposed to admit that he is a better man than I am I must take the challenge up as soon as possible."

"Oh, yes, I begin to understand; this is the Western way of fighting a duel!" the old lawyer declared.

"Exactly! not much fuss and feathers, as you will perceive, but business from the word, go!" Blake explained.

"Now, Doc, I will walk up the street and get in position," the sport continued. "And if you will have the kindness to hunt up a messenger to send to Mike Dufoy—"

"I will go myself!" the landlord exclaimed.

"If you will be so kind I will be much obliged," Blake declared.

"Oh, that is all right and I am glad to be able to accommodate you."

"You can say to Mike that I have been told

he has a grudge against me, and I am perfectly willing to give him satisfaction; it does not make any difference either to me whether he takes it up himself or sends some one to represent him. It is all the same to me."

"I stand ready to meet all comers and all I stipulate is that they shall come one at a time."

"If they will engage to come on singly I am willing to meet all the fighting-men that he can muster; provided that they don't use rifles or shot-guns, they can have a cart-load of revolvers and knives for all I care."

"Well, all I have got to say is that if Mike is not satisfied with that lay-out he must be an extremely hard man to please—a regular hog in fact!" the landlord exclaimed, in profound admiration.

The old lawyer shook his head; to his thinking this was the most astonishing piece of business that he had ever heard of in all his experience, and if he had not been an eye-witness he would not have been willing to believe that any such a thing could possibly occur.

"I will just take a look at my tools to see if they are in working order," Blake remarked, as he slipped his revolvers out of their holsters and began an examination.

"It would be a pity, you know, in an affair of this kind for a man to literally throw his life away because his weapons were a little out of order."

"Oh, yes, that is true," Doc Slater remarked. "And I have known just such a thing to happen too."

"Certainly! Many a good man has lost his life on account of a defective cartridge, or because at a critical moment his revolver wouldn't work," the sport remarked.

"When men go into a game where life is the stake they cannot be too careful."

"That is so," the landlord assented. "And if a man isn't careful, the chances are big that he will get left in the worst kind of way."

"I am all ready; my tools are in good working order, and you can go ahead as soon as you like," Blake declared.

Doc Slater at once departed.

Blake followed him and strolled up the street, while the landlord proceeded to the saloon. Mr. De Witt remained in the doorway, nervous with excitement.

A hundred feet up the street the Fresh halted.

Hardly had he got in position when Doc Slater made his appearance, followed by Dufoy and George, the Killer.

The pair had their revolvers out.

The landlord waved his hand toward Blake, then hurried across the street and sought the shelter of his own doorway.

There were only a few people in the street, but the quickness with which they got out of the way when they noticed the warlike preparations was laughable.

Mike Dufoy was so enraged by the course which the Fresh had pursued that he had resolved to take vengeance into his own hands, so he advanced to give battle, while the barkeeper remained in the rear.

Dufoy was so anxious to kill the sport that he did not attempt to fire until he got within about seventy feet, and then he brought his revolver up to the level. But Blake was on the watch, and he fired before his antagonist could take aim.

So good a marksman as Blake could not fail to hit his man at such a distance, and the ruffian went down with a bullet in his lungs, his account with this world abruptly closed.

A howl of rage came from George the Killer, when he saw his patron fall, and he dashed forward eager to revenge his defeat.

The Fresh did not wait for the new foe to fire, but blazed away as soon as he got within range.

The second bullet was as fatal as the first. Down went George, the Killer, writhing in the agonies of death.

The two desperadoes, with the blood of many innocent victims upon their hands, were thus abruptly sent to their doom, and when the affair became known to the citizens of the mining-camp it was the unanimous opinion that the Fresh had done the town a great service.

This unexpected affair detained the two ladies for a few days, for as Mike Dufoy had no relations that anybody knew anything about, Mrs. Vanderhoven was declared by the citizens to be his heir, and she had to stay until the saloon was sold, and the money paid over to her.

Then, in company with the old lawyer, the ladies departed.

Miss Vanderhoven was the last one to shake hands with Blake.

"Don't forget your promise, for I shall soon call upon you to keep it!" she declared.

These words were a mystery to the hearers, and the general impression was that the rich young Eastern girl, the heiress of many millions, had fallen in love with bold Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco.

Whether this was the truth or not, the reader will learn anon, when we again take up the pen to chronicle the deeds of the man as dauntless in his courage as any of the famous knights of chivalry, the heroes of the olden time.

THE END.

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216 The Corsair Planter; or, Driven to Doom.
210 Buccaneer Bess, the Lioness of the Sea.
205 The Gambler Pirate; or, Lady of the Lagoon.
198 The Skeleton Schooner; or, The Skimmer.
184 The Ocean Vampire; or, The Castle Heiress.
181 The Scarlet Schooner; or, The Sea Nemesis.
177 Don Diablo, the Planter-Corsair.
172 Black Pirate; or, The Golden Fetters Mystery.
162 The Mad Mariner; or, Dishonored and Disowned.
155 The Corsair Queen; or, The Gypsies of the Sea.
147 Gold Spur, the Gentleman from Texas.
139 Fire Eye; or, The Bride of a Buccaneer.
134 Darkey Dan, the Colored Detective.
131 Buckskin Sam, the Texas Trailer.
128 The Chevalier Corsair; or, The Heritage.
121 The Sea Cadet; or, The Rover of the Rigoletts.
116 Black Plume; or, The Sorceress of Hell Gate.
109 Captain Kyd, the King of the Black Flag.
104 Montezuma, the Merciless.
103 Merle, the Mutineer; or, The Red Anchor Brand.
94 Freeland, the Buccaneer.
89 The Pirate Prince; or, The Queen of the Isle.
85 The Cretan Rover; or, Zuleikah the Beautiful.
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- 644 Buffalo Bill's Bonanza.
*639 The Gold King; or, Montebello, the Magnificent.
629 Dareddeath Dick; or, Buffalo Bill's Daring Role.
*599 The Dead Shot Nine; or, My Pards of the Plains.
517 Buffalo Bill's First Trail.
*414 Red Renard, the Indian Detective.
*401 One-Armed Pard; or, Borderland Retribution.
*397 The Wizard Brothers; or, White Beaver's Trail.
*394 White Beaver, the Exile of the Platte.
362 Buffalo Bill's Grip; or Oath Bound to Custer.
329 The League of Three; or, Buffalo Bill's Pledge.
*319 Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West.
*304 Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler.
*243 The Pilgrim Sharp; or, The Soldier's Sweetheart.
189 Wild Bill's Gold Trail; or, The Desperate Dozen.
175 Wild Bill's Trump Card; or, The Indian Heiress.
168 Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot.
92 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.
*53 Gold Bullet Sport; or, Knights of the Overland.
*53 Death-Trailer, the Chief of Scouts.

BY J. C. COWDRICK.

- 626 Ducats Dion, the Nabob Sport Detective.
612 Sheriff Stillwood, the Regulator of Raspberry.
598 The Dominie Detective.
591 Duke Daniels, the Society Detective.
580 Shadowing a Shadow.
565 Prince Paul, the Postman Detective.
557 The Mountain Graybeards; or, Riddles' Riddle.
519 Old Riddles, the Rocky Ranger.
499 Twilight Charlie, the Road Sport.
472 Gilbert of Gotham, the Steel-arm Detective.
452 Rainbow Rob, the Tulip from Texas.
436 Kentucky Jean, the Sport from Yellow Pine.
422 Blue Grass Burt, the Gold Star Detective.
390 The Giant Cupid; or Cibuta John's Jubilee.

BY COLONEL DELLE SARA.

- 106 Shamus O'Brien, the Bould Boy of Glingal.
87 The Scarlet Captain; or, Prisoner of the Tower.
53 Silver Sam; or, The Mystery of Deadwood City.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN.

- 647 The Fresh of Frisco at Santa Fe.
637 Joe Phenix in Crazy Camp.
632 Joe Phenix's Master Search.
628 Joe Phenix's Combine.
620 Joe Phenix's Silent Six.
613 Keen Billy, the Sport.
607 Old Benzine, the "Hard Case" Detective.
601 Joe Phenix's Shadow.
594 Fire Face, the Silver King's Foe.
583 The Silver Sharp Detective.
577 Tom of California.
570 The Actress Detective; or, The Invisible Hat.
562 Lone Hand, the Shadow.
556 Fresh, the Sport-Chevalier.
537 Blake, the Mountain Lion.
529 The Fresh in New York.
520 The Lone Hand on the Caddo.
497 The Fresh in Texas.
490 The Lone Hand in Texas.
475 Chin Chin, the Chinese Detective.
465 The Actor Detective.
461 The Fresh on the Rio Grande.
440 The High Horse of the Pacific.
423 The Lone Hand; or, The Red River Recreants.
419 The Bat of the Battery; or, Joe Phenix, Detective.
408 Doc Grip, the Vendetta of Death.
391 Kate Scott, the Decoy Detective.
384 Injun Dick, Detective; or, Tracked to New York.
381 The Gypsy Gentleman; or, Nick Fox, Detective.
376 Black Beards; or, The Rio Grande High Horse.
370 The Dusky Detective; or, Pursued to the End.
363 Crowningshield, the Detective.
354 Red Richard; or, The Crimson Cross Brand.
349 Iron-Hearted Dick, the Gentleman Road-Agent.
320 The Genteel Spotter; or, The N. Y. Night Hawk.
252 The Wall Street Blood; or, The Telegraph Girl.
203 The Double Detective; or, The Midnight Mystery.
196 La Marmoset, the Detective Queen.
173 California John, the Pacific Thoroughbred.
161 The Wolves of New York; or, Joe Phenix's Hunt.
130 Captain Volcano; or, The Man of Red Revolvers.
112 Joe Phenix, Private Detective.
107 Richard Talbot, of Cinnabar.
101 The Man from New York.
97 Bronze Jack, the California Thoroughbred.
93 Captain Dick Talbot, King of the Road.
91 The Winning Oar; or, The Innkeeper's Daughter.
84 Hunted Down; or, The League of Three.
81 The Human Tiger; or, A Heart of Fire.
79 Joe Phenix, the Police Spy.
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56 The Indian Mazeppa; or, Madman of the Plains.
49 The Wolf Demon; or, The Kanawha Queen.
42 The California Detective; or, The Witches of N.Y.
41 Gold Dan; or, The White Savage of Salt Lake.
38 Velvet Hand; or, Injun Dick's Iron Grip.
36 Injun Dick; or, The Death-Shot of Shasta.
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